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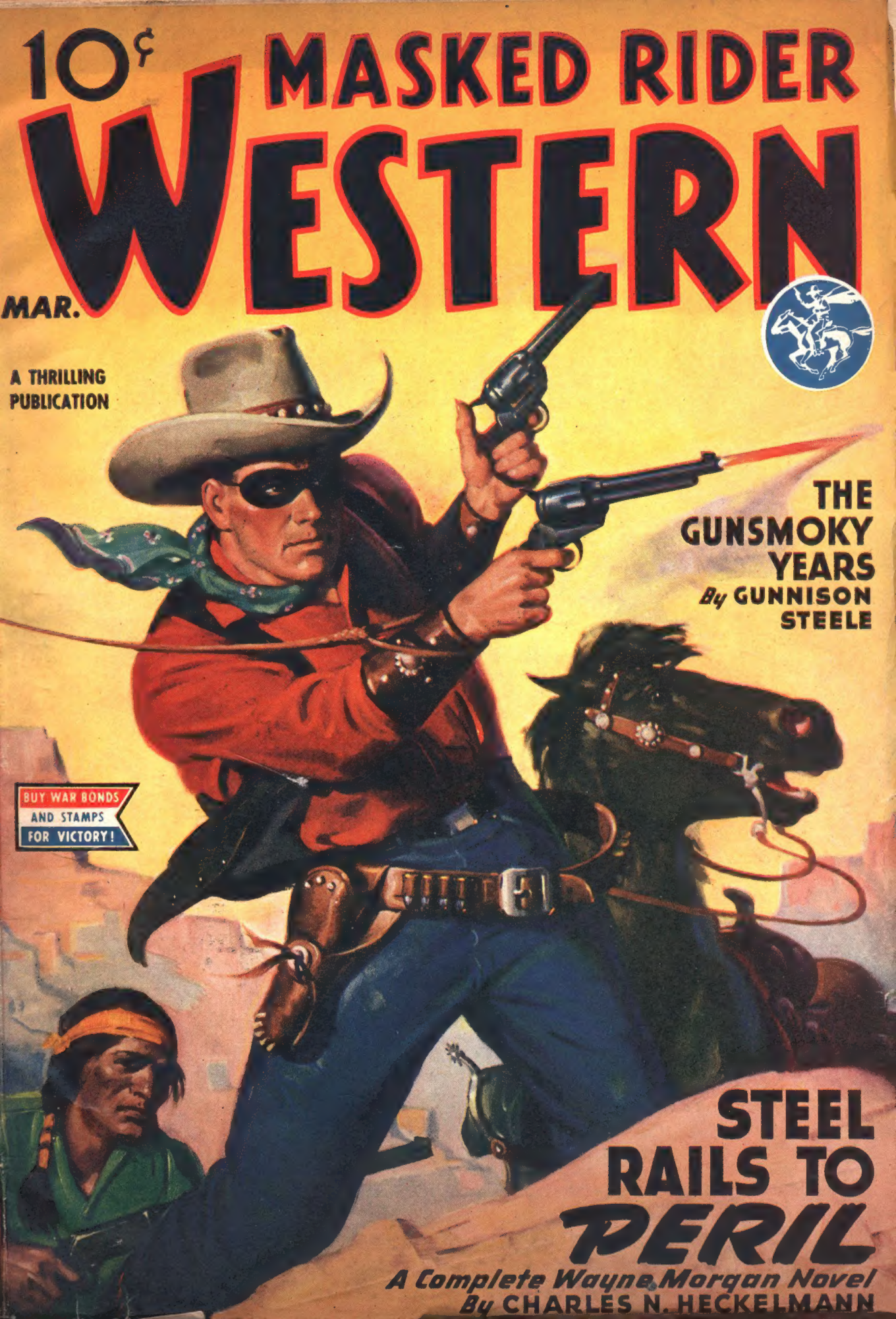

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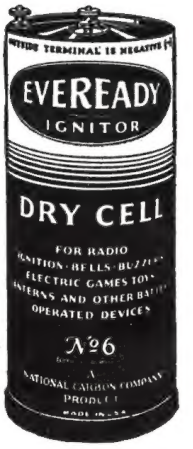

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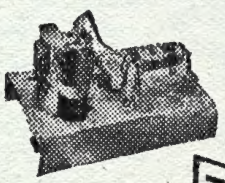

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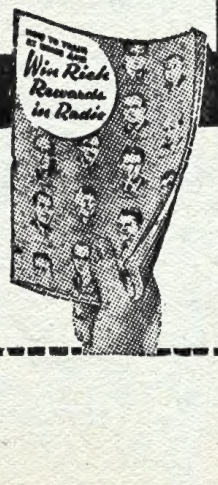

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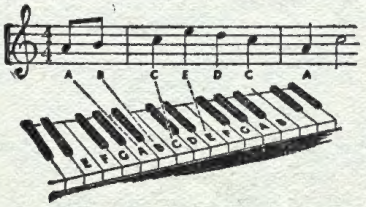

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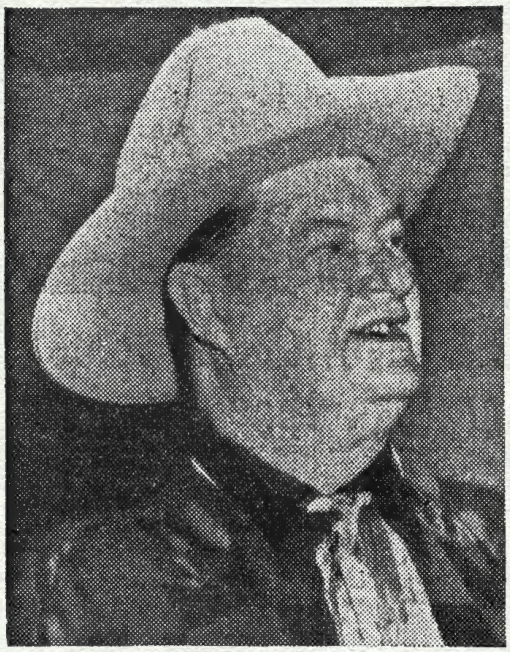
The building of the West is the story of the progress of an empire. When we pause to



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contemplate, to evaluate, and to appreciate the lives of the men and women who had the foresight, the courage and the strength to leave their homes in the East or in the civilized part of our country to conquer the West, we are filled with awe and admiration.

The Spirit of Adventure

The spirit of investigation, of adventure, and of conquest led the Spanish Fathers, the explorers, and the Trail Makers to walk and to ride their ponies over the mountain passes. Their eyes were wide open to every detail, their pens were busy making records and maps, their minds were alert to the possibilities of the wide open spaces.

In search of a place to build homes and establish a community life, a group of one hundred and forty-three persons led by Brigham Young entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake on July 24th, 1847. They had left their homes on the westward journey in February, 1846, and had faced the hardships of a winter on the plains.

They had learned what it was to be thirsty in an arid desolate country. They had heard the cry of the wild beasts of the forest when they tried to sleep after a long day's journey had made them dog-tired. They had seen and knew with what stealth the hostile Indians stalked their prey. Imagine then the joy that came to these people as their leader said, "This is the place."

Salt Lake Valley

The Great Salt Lake Valley was not then the rich fertile valley that it is today, but those people had foresight. They could visualize what work on the part of man could do to a country like that. Following this group, there came hundreds and thousands of people from all parts of the United States and from most of the countries of Europe. Here they learned to work, to share, and to live together.

Each man contributed what he had and what he knew and all worked for the good of the whole community. Necessity made them brothers.

The arrival of the pioneers in these valleys formed the starting point—the commencement of a delightful oasis in the desert wilds of North America. It established a midway settlement between Eastern and Western civilization, a connecting link between the rich agricultural products of the Atlantic and the undeveloped mineral treasures of the Pacific.

Plowing began, and soon the parched ground became a watered garden, the desert bloomed with beauty, the sage-covered land brought forth its strength, the streams were utilized, new springs were discovered, the sand turned into loam, and the clay into rich soil. All the products that were needful for

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

good food yielded their fruits in marvelous abundance.

The Gold Rush

Two years after Brigham Young led his followers into the Great Salt Lake Valley, gold was discovered in California and the great rush westward began, and on the second anniversary of their arrival there was held the first Pioneer Day Celebration.

For the service a bower was erected, one hundred feet long by sixty feet wide, and a canopy extended on either side about one hundred feet. The National Flag, measuring sixty-five feet in length, was unfurled at the top of a liberty pole one hundred and four feet high.

The day was ushered in by the firing of guns and spirit-stirring music from the band. A grand procession was formed and the service was opened by prayer.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States was read, songs, speeches, toasts, sentiments, and music followed, and then came the grand dinner free to everybody. Several thousand residents and several hundreds of emigrants on their way to California partook of the repast. The feast was composed of the products of the ground which two years before was desert waste. It was a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing and the people of Utah accepted July 24th as Utah Day, a State holiday, and that day is celebrated annually in the state each year now, nearly a century since that first celebration.

Onward Progress

In these times of stress in the world, let us take time to consider the lives and spirit of the pioneers. They came singing and dancing, radiant in hope, fearless in courage, supreme in faith, they accepted each day as it came and they had the strength to make the onward progress.

Now artists came forth to tell the story in painting, in fiction, in poetry, in music, in drama, in pageantry, and the many-sided soul of the West will be permitted to reveal itself in spirit and in truth for generations to come. Its tales, its legends, its stories of men good and bad will be told and retold for many, many years.

Long before Brigham Young's party settled in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, there were pioneer missionaries and Spaniards who braved the wrath of hostile Indians to establish missions in California, Arizona and New Mexico. One of these was Father Kino.

A Courageous Missionary

Born near Trent, Austrian Tyrol, August 10th, 1644, he came to Mexico as a missionary, landing in Vera Cruz on May 3rd, 1681. Attempts had long been made to found missions in California, but without success.

In January, 1683, an expedition sailed with renewed determination to effect a settlement in California and Father Kino accompanied this expedition, not only as superior of the California mission, but also, as royal astronomer, surveyor, and map-maker.

As usual in these early Spanish attempts

at colonization, the object was two-fold; to find and gather gems or precious metals, and to convert the Indians.

A landing was made at La Paz. A log church and log huts were erected. Father Kino devoted himself with loving and ardent heart to missionary work. He was optimistic and full of courage in the midst of many dangers and hardships. But alas the Indians grew so hostile that the project had to be abandoned.

A few years after the attempted colonization in California Father Kino came up from Mexico into Arizona and established several missions. He did much toward civilization among the Yuma Indians, and to him also is credited the discovery that California is a peninsula and not an island as then believed.

The Yuma Indians had presented Father Kino with certain lovely blue shells. He had seen shells like these on the western shore of California, when he had come by boat on the colonization project that failed. He felt sure that the Indians who had gathered those shells had not rowed canoes across a wide expanse of rough water and therefore there must be an overland way of reaching California.

The Oldest Town

Many of the settlements and missions established by Father Kino and other missionaries were later destroyed by the Indians, but one that has long been a relic of past attempts to settle and civilize the west is the Church of San Miguel, at Santa Fe, New Mexico.

What a theme for a romancer—what a subject for a painter—how this picturesque old church looms up dark, desolate, and weird against the sky. How worn and battered it is by the storms of years. What mute witness of a distant, buried past! For Santa Fe, the town in which San Miguel stands, is the oldest in the United States.

When the Spaniards discovered it in 1540, it was an Indian pueblo; and a Spanish town was actually founded there before the close of the 16th century, and nearly a generation before the Mayflower had cut the waves of the Atlantic with her daring prow. Tradition says that the birth of this church of San

(Continued on page 93)

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All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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Morgan hefted the fellow above his head and tossed him on top of the huddled forms (CHAPTER VII)

STEEL RAILS TO PERIL

By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

The Masked Rider Battles to Stem a Reign of Lawlessness and Destruction When Enemies of Progress Use Railroad Rivalry as a Cloak for Their Foul, Murderous Schemes!

CHAPTER I

The Wreck in Solo Canyon

THE long Wyoming & Western construction train toiled up the grade toward Solo Canyon on gleaming, newly bolted rails, with black smoke belching from the locomotive stack. A crisp winter wind with a razor-sharp edge whipped the smoke in a feathery, trailing plume above the line of gondolas and flats that jolted through the bleak, rugged northern Wyoming country.

Up in the engine cab ruddy-faced Tom

A Complete Book-Length Wayne Morgan Novel

Brady flicked a glance at the steam gauge, shoved the throttle forward through the entire arc of the sextant. The rhythm of the hammering piston strokes increased and there was an eager rush of steam up through the stack.

The train buckled, couplings crashing in a solid rattle and the huge high-wheeler's drive rods spun over the rails in a gray-black blur. Mike O'Leary, the soot-smudged tallowpot, hooked open the firebox door with his scoop and bailed in more coal. Flames leaped and danced, flushing a bright ruby glow across the cab floor.

"Keep feedin' her, Mike, me bhoy!" yelled Brady, turning his good-natured Irish face toward O'Leary's bent back. "Shure an' we need every pound of steam we can get with this load behind us."

O'Leary grinned and went on shoveling great scoops of coal upon the fire. The pressure steadily mounted and the booming *whock* of the exhaust thundered in their ears.

Behind the snorting locomotive was a loaded material train. Flats and gondolas heaped with rails, spikes, ties, rough board lumber for construction shanties, hay and grain, and a wide assortment of tools including axes, mauls, grading scoops, shovels and tamping bars. And on the last flat in front of the caboose were a score of rough and tough slab-muscled Irish paddies, ready to join the thousands already laboring for Wyoming & Western, helping to hew an empire of steel out of the wilderness.

All day and all night loaded supply trains rolled up from distant Kansas City, chuffing past the boom town of Silver Bow on to end of track where the rails and creosoted ties were spilled out upon the right of way. And always, on the opposite track other engines pulled long strings of empties back to Missouri to the supply depots.

The rails marched on steadily, and at each mile the wilderness was pushed back. Four miles, five miles a day the sweating, swearing, hard-fighting, hard-working section hands pushed those twin ribbons of steel.

FAR ahead engineers and surveyors were making final checks on their location lines. Fifty miles from end of track a thousand graders labored with scoops and shovels and straining horse and mule teams, ploughing through hills and valleys, putting down a level roadbed for the rails.

Three miles of new track each day had been the highest construction mark reached by Wyoming & Western. Yet Division Superintendent Jim Brown at Silver Bow, and Colonel Jack Darwin, one of the big directors from the East, were not satisfied.

They wanted six—even seven miles of track laid. They had to hit that mark or go down to certain defeat in the headlong race with Colorado Central to push steel into Salt Lake.

The Federal Government had bestowed extensive land grants and subsidies upon both roads, yet only one railroad would be permitted to set up a terminal in Salt Lake. That meant the loser would be forced to detour and continue on westward to some other town, build a new town in the hope that it would attract sufficient freight and passenger traffic to keep the road operating.

For months the grim race had been going on. From early spring and on through a torrid summer, Wyoming & Western and Colorado Central had driven their construction crews without any let-up. Now with winter approaching and Wyoming & Western heading into a stiff range of mountains there was imminent danger of all construction being halted by the first big blizzard.

Both Wyoming & Western and Colorado Central had had to fight the natural hazards of the wilderness, the rugged and unbroken country, the broiling heat, sudden raids on section lines by warring Sioux and Arapahoe, fights in the boom towns, and the daily strike of death through violence or disease.

But lately other trouble had beset Wyoming & Western—trouble that had nothing to do with Indian raids or disease or natural hazards. Tom Brady was thinking of these new and ominous developments when he shouted a question at O'Leary.

"Do ye think we'll be makin' the run to end of track safely this time, Mike?"

O'Leary drew a grimy sleeve across his sweat-streaked forehead and grinned. But before he could answer a third man in the engine cab, Jack Bannion, broke in. Bannion was Wyoming & Western's

new trouble shooter on his way to replace Sid Stevens who had been shot by saloon toughs.

"Is there anythin' to cause yuh to think yuh won't reach end of track without accident?" Bannion asked tensely.

"Are yez forgettin' the three supply trains that were wrecked within the last five weeks?" asked Brady.

"I'd heard they were accidents. Two caused by loosened rails and faulty roadbed."

"That's what they're sayin'," grunted Brady and anger leaped into his blue eyes. "But don't believe it. There ain't a better rail gang foreman alive than Pat Callahan who's ridin' this train. When he lays steel and his paddies hammer the spikes home, the tracks are there to stay. And Lanny Borden's graders know their job, too."

"Yuh think somebody's been tamperin' with the rails?"

"That's what I do," growled Brady. "And I'm sayin' it's that bunch of Colorado Central scalawags who are tryin' to keep us from beatin' 'em to Salt Lake. If I know Bill Tracy he'll stop at nothin'. He's Central's trouble shooter, but he hangs around Wyoming and Western most of the time and there's always a bunch of hard-cases taggin' along at his heels."

"Ye're wrong, Tom," insisted O'Leary, leaning on his shovel, stumpy legs braced as the train swayed around a curve. "It's Big Ed Graham that the railroad's got to watch. The government took away a lot of his free graze and handed it to Wyoming and Western. Graham ain't a man to forget that. Shure an' I'll give yez three to one it's him that got them tie-cutters to strike for their overdue pay."

WAYNE MORGAN

BRADY shrugged. He turned to the cab window to slant a keen glance out along the rails that stretched steadily away up the slope.

They were nearing the summit of the long grade now and Solo Canyon had widened considerably. On either side stretched towering walls of shale. But on the right side the wall was close, while to the left was a level stretch broken by an occasional gully or culvert and rimmed by broken rocks and thorny brush.

Brady tugged at the whistle cord. The thin, eerie wail sped through the canyon, bouncing back and forth from rock to rock.

Into the tail end of that sound came

a rumbling roar. It grew in volume, became a thunderous din, was multiplied by other booming concussions.

Dread tinged Tom Brady's face gray as he lunged to the cab window. His narrowed eyes were greeted by the horrible picture of tons and tons of rock cascading into the defile.

A gray smother of dust rose up to dim the sky's brightness. The landslide tumbled thousands of rocks down the shaly slopes. They swept over the tracks, buried them in debris and rubble.

Brady swung back, shut off the throttle and threw on the air brakes. Sparks flew from the pounding drivers. Brake blocks squealed against protesting wheel flanges and the desperate engineer shoved open a pet-cock, shooting sand from the boiler dome to the rails, fighting the forward momentum of the train with air and sand.

But the huge locomotive rolled on into the landslide. Hurtling boulders bounded down the mountainside, swept against the steel sides of the high-wheeler. Under that crushing, onspeeding weight the locomotive left the rails.

The cow-catcher and whirling drive wheels plowed into the other section of track, digging up the newly set ties, gouging a deep furrow in the road-bed.

"Jump!" yelled Brady, but never knew whether the other two men made the jump in time.

Suddenly the locomotive plunged over on its side, careened down a shaly slope into an embankment. There was a deafening explosion as the boiler burst. A geyser of steam billowed into the sky.

Metal crashed and splintered and the loaded supply cars, with couplings and draw-bars smashing, spilled sideward off the rails. Ties and spikes and rails were dumped to the road-bed and were engulfed by the landslide.

Dust and smoke made a gray-black pall, and through the mounting racket came the terrible cries of smothered men as the lurching string of flats and gondolas were trapped in a gushing stream of rocks.

Back in the flat-car with his laborers, Pat Callahan, rail gang foreman had been watching the swaying line of supply cars ahead of him and listening to the rhythmic *click-clack* of the wheels. Around him other paddies, brawny and bearded, and bearing the marks of hard and riotous living, lifted their brawling voices above the racket of the train, chafing at the inaction which held them on this flat-car.

Every head turned at the first booming roar of the landslide. Callahan, his broad, heavy-boned face mirroring instant concern, climbed to his feet and stared toward the front of the train. In one flashing instant he saw the canyon wall ahead seem to come apart, then go crashing downward in a smothering spray of rock and dust and shale.

THE abrupt slash of the air brakes and the sand, cutting into the train's momentum, sent jolting, buckling crashes down the whole length of flats and gondolas. Callahan was thrown from his feet. Other paddies were nearly hurled off the flat.

Men milled in a heaving tangle on the lurching car. Callahan scrambled up, saw the locomotive leave the tracks and go plunging across the right of way, tearing up ties and rails. Cinders and coal sprayed the air.

Then fresh disaster came down upon the paddies as another rumbling roar above them announced the onslaught of more crashing rocks. The cliff-face above dissolved, amid a booming concussion, into tons of sliding rock that rushed down upon the flat-car and caboose!

CHAPTER II

The Masked Rider Intervenes

YELLING to the other laborers, Callahan leaped into space. Other paddies followed suit. But those caught in the crush of bodies in the rear were not so fortunate. They were trapped in a hopeless tangle of arms and legs as the flat-car upended and capsized.

Callahan struck the edge of the road-bed on his shoulders. He felt a savage jolt of pain. A spinning rock glanced off his thigh. Another splinter slanted across his face, drawing a warm stream of blood. He rolled over and over, instinctively cowering against the cries of dying men which knifed through the

There was a thunderous din and tons and tons of rock cascaded into the defile (CHAPTER I)

horrible din.

For minutes he lay half-dazed among splintered ties, fallen rock and shale. Dust got into his throat and gagged him. But finally he stirred out of the debris and climbed uncertainly to his feet.

He was big and solidly built, this paddy. His hair was a shaggy black mane, there was a ruddiness to his complexion and wildness in his clear blue eyes. The mark of many a rough-and-tumble fight was on his cheeks and the white slash of a knife scar made a half-moon at the base of his wide jaw.

Men were yelling and shouting on all sides. He saw, then, that the paddies who had survived were moving through the debris, trying to free their comrades who lay buried beneath tons of rock.

The roar of sliding rock had subsided now. Steam still hissed from the locomotive's split boiler. But the scene was ominously quiet as compared to the thunderous tumult which had filled the canyon minutes before.

"Work fast, paddies!" yelled Callahan. "We've got to be savin' the other bhoys!"

"Another accident to delay Wyoming and Western," grunted one of the shaken section hands.

"'Tis no accident in my mind," grumbled Callahan. "There's been too many of our supply trains wrecked lately. I'm bettin' it's the blasted spalpeens from Colorado Central who—"

He broke off as the sound of hoofs came from the shallow wall of the defile.

"The Masked Rider!" somebody yelled.

Those who were not already busy moving ties and rails, lifting away huge boulders to free imprisoned victims, swung around to watch two riders slide their horses recklessly down the shaly slope of Solo Canyon.

"Rifles, paddies!" a second hand shouted. "'Tis my belief the Masked Rider and the brown lad with him have somethin' to do with this wreck."

"Back, ye fools!" ordered Callahan, his eyes narrowing. "If 'tis the Masked Rider for shure we'll not be needin' our rifles. What I've heard about him makes me guess he's come to help—just as he's helped others all over the West."

The two riders came on swiftly and drew to a halt at the edge of the right of way. The leader was, indeed, the Masked Rider, the Robin Hood outlaw whose exploits were known throughout the land.

He was the follower of lonely, dangerous trails, the avowed enemy of all lawbreakers. No one knew anything of his past, nor where or when he had first appeared. But cowmen, traders, railroad pioneers and freighters all through the West called him their friend, for his timely intervention had helped many stave off ruin, or had put an end to the oppression of the lawless.

As he dismounted, standing by the head of his gallant black stallion, Midnight, the Masked Rider was a stern, commanding figure. His shoulders, half-concealed under a dark, flowing cloak, were broad and muscular. A black sombrero was tilted at a rakish angle over his thick, dark hair. His eyes, behind the narrow slits of a mask, were bright and sharply appraising.

HE WAS a man to whom trouble was no stranger. Fear had never played any rôle in his turbulent existence. All the wildness and tumult of frontier life were reflected in the recklessness of his spirit, in the savage directness with which he met each new peril.

A pair of black-butted Colts were thonged low on each thigh, and there was that in his eyes, in the smooth grace of each motion which suggested he was a master in handling those six-guns.

His silent, mahogany-hued companion was Blue Hawk, a Yaqui Indian who accompanied the black-clad rider on every mission of mercy.

Stolid and unmoving in the saddle, his dark eyes were incredibly watchful. He had been educated in a mission school and spoke English without an accent, but he retained the fierce courage and loyalty of the Yaquis, their keen ability at trailing.

A white shirt and cotton drill trousers clothed his muscular body. A red bandeau held his shoulder-length black hair from his craggy features. Instead of a six-gun, he carried a keen-bladed sheath knife in the bright-colored sash about his waist.

Callahan studied both riders briefly, then concentrated his attention upon the black-clad man.

"I guess ye're the Masked Rider all

right," Callahan said. "What yez doin' here?"

"We were headin' west," said the black-clad man, "when we saw the train enter the cut a few miles back. Then we heard the landslide and figgered you fellers had run into trouble and might need help."

The Masked Rider started toward the pile of rubble where a half-dozen paddies were toiling feverishly to free a man who lay half-buried under a pile of rocks.

"No time for jawin' here," he said crisply. "There's work to be done. Come on, Hawk."

The Yaqui joined the Masked Rider and they lent their strength and efforts to the task of pulling the paddy out of the rubble. The man was in agony, but he made no outcry, his lips set and firm. One look at the weight of rocks on his legs told the Masked Rider that both legs were broken.

The masked man hurled several huge rocks aside. Then with the help of Callahan and Blue Hawk, they rolled aside a particularly large boulder and pulled the prostrate Irishman clear.

The victim was bleeding from several deep cuts. Working deftly and smoothly, the Masked Rider tore off strips of the man's shirt and dipped them in the flow of a small stream which seeped out of the canyon wall. He bathed the cuts quickly, then fashioned crude bandages.

With an axe he hacked some of the thin roofing shingles which had been tossed off one of the gondolas into crude splints and fastened them to the Irishman's fractured legs.

Other maimed and wounded section hands were being pulled out of the wreckage. It was hot, fatiguing work, but Callahan's tough paddies were used to it. They dug and clawed at the rubble. Men, two and four to each rail, lifted them out of the welter of stones and ties and dirt.

The Masked Rider paused, after moving a dozen rails and sections of a splintered flat-car from the motionless body of a laborer who would never again swing a spike maul. His narrowed eyes wandered up and down the length of the wrecked train, seeing the twisted, overturned cars, the mountainous mass of rocks and dirt, the smashed remains of the once powerful locomotive.

"Me and Hawk thought we heard an explosion," he said to Callahan. "A dynamite explosion, right in the midst of that uproar produced by the landslide."

CALLAHAN jerked his head up, instant attention in his widened blue eyes.

"'Tis no surprise to me, if ye did hear it," he said savagely. "We've been buckin' Colorado Central all summer and fall in a race to Salt Lake. Them spalpeens would stop at nothin' to halt our construction. It's them or the cattlemen."

"If yuh're so shore this wreck was not accidental, mebbe we can find proof," suggested the Masked Rider. He straightened. "Hawk," he said, "take a ride back through the defile and get around to the south rim. See what yuh find up there."

"*Si*, Senor," replied the Indian stolidly.

Callahan watched him ride off along the right of way, then turned back to the dead and wounded. Bitterness marked the Irishman's ruddy countenance and hot anger, too.

"Seven of the bhoys are still missin'," he murmured thickly.

The Masked Rider peered at the tangled confusion of split ties, uprooted rails and scattered tools. His eyes were bleak and cold and an aroused purpose began to simmer in his brain.

"No help for them if they're buried under that mess," he said. "They're smothered by this time." He paused and his voice grew deeper. "But we can find the skunks who did this and pay 'em back."

A wild roar of approval greeted that. These paddies were a hard, brawling lot, not given much to a display of emotion. But seeing the ruthless destruction of their mates, filled their eyes with tears that came unashamed. These men were spoiling for a fight. It showed in the thrust of their jaws, in the wild light bannering from their eyes.

"Shure an' when we see Tracy and his Colorado Central bunch we'll wipe up the town of Silver Bow with 'em!" roared Callahan.

The paddies began to clamber over the loose rock and shale toward the front of the train. They passed the capsized tender, detoured around the huge mound of coal which had spilled from the pock-

et and came to the wrecked locomotive. The force of its plunge from the rails had sent it burrowing three feet in the fresh earth.

Strips of twisted metal lay strewn about. Fifty feet from the cab lay the bodies of Tom Brady and Mike O'Leary. Both were dead, horribly maimed and scalded. Beside the Masked Rider Callahan began to curse brokenly.

"The best hogger and fireman that ever batted the stack off an iron horse," he said at last, in a voice that was very quiet. He looked up, then, peering about uncertainly. "Wonder where that new trouble shooter is."

"Trouble shooter?" repeated the masked man.

"Yeah. Heard he was supposed to catch this construction train for Silver Bow and ride up in the engine cab. Don't know if he caught it or not. Didn't know his name—and don't see him here in the wreckage.

"Nothin' more yuh can do here," the Masked Rider pointed out. "Better string out those three hand-cars I saw on that gondola that didn't leave the tracks. Load the wounded on it and head for Silver Bow. Yuh can notify the railroad to send out a wreckin' crew."

Callahan swung around, his lusty voice booming into the late afternoon stillness.

"Get them hand-cars on the rails, me buckos! We're headin' for Silver Bow."

In a big phalanx the Irishmen moved off. Quickly a half dozen of them hauled one of the hand-cars from the gondola and trundled it up canyon past the torn track and placed it on the rails. Soon all three hand-cars were waiting for the bodies of the injured to be carried up.

THE Masked Rider had wandered off down a slight embankment into a deep culvert, momentarily out of sight of the laboring construction crew. Stumbling along in the stunted brush and rubble, he came upon the sprawled body of a man.

One side of the man's head was caved in and his face was covered with bloody cuts and contusions. His eyes were glazed with approaching death, yet a feeble spark of life sent a whispering breath past his cracked lips.

"Yuh—yuh're the—Masked Rider," he gasped. "Good—man. See Jim Brown—Silver Bow. Wreck in Solo Canyon. Can't—take that—job."

The Masked Rider had dropped to his knees beside the man to catch the last of his whispered words. The man's hand moved to the breast pocket of his torn shirt. Then a shudder convulsed the long body and death terminated his agony.

CHAPTER III

Boom Town

AN impulse to violence shook the Masked Rider. Another man dead in this horrible wreck! Some premonition told him that here in the wilds of Wyoming he was going to find an immediate use for his special talents with fist and six-gun.

He dug an exploring hand into the man's pocket and found a folded letter. It was from Colonel Darwin of Wyoming & Western to Division Superintendent Jim Brown. It read:

Brown:

This letter will introduce Jack Bannion, your new trouble shooter. He's a tough customer and fast with his guns. Give him a free hand in Silver Bow and at end of track. Colorado Central is building fast and we've got to better our mark of five miles of track a day.

Your job is to lay steel. Bannion's job will be to bust up any troubles or delays—no matter who he has to kill to do it. Those "accidents" to our construction trains must stop. And so must the riots in the saloons—if Bannion has to put the paddies to work tearing down every honkytonk in Silver Bow.

Colonel Darwin.

By the time the Masked Rider reached the end of the letter his eyes were glittering with a strange brilliance. Here was trouble for the asking! A call he could not ignore.

Somebody was trying to break Wyoming & Western. The masked man could guess from the tone of the letter that trouble shooters didn't last long. And he could guess that one would be a target for every saloon tough and all the Border riffraff that swarmed into these prairie boom towns.

But he suddenly resolved—and the de-

cision made the blood hum in his veins—that from this moment, if he could get away with the masquerade, he would be the new Wyoming & Western trouble shooter.

Quickly he took out a pencil, carefully erased Bannion's name from the letter and substituted Wayne Morgan. Fortunately the handwriting was a rough scrawl and not difficult to imitate.

He rolled Bannion's body deeper into the culvert and covered it with rocks and loose shale. Then he took a roundabout route back to the right of way.

He arrived there just as Blue Hawk galloped into view. The Yaqui rode past the wreckage and pulled his horse to a halt close to the three hand-cars.

"What did yuh find, Hawk?" the black-clad man asked eagerly.

The Indian's expression remained taciturn, but his voice was vibrant with emotion.

"The landslide was no accident, Senor," he replied. He held up several strands of fuse, a stick of dynamite and two percussion caps which had failed to detonate. "I found these up on the rim, as well as the prints of many horses."

"That settles it!" roared Callahan. "Shure an' I knew 'twas planned to wreck this train!"

"Somebody certainly wants to smash Wyoming and Western," the Masked Rider observed. "Which way did the tracks go, Hawk?"

"West. I followed them for a half mile then lost them on hard ground. Senor wishes me to pick up that trail again?"

"No matter," said the Masked Rider. He called to Callahan. "How far is the nearest town from here?"

"Seven miles. The town is Silver Bow."

"I reckon that's where them riders went after the explosion," said the Masked Rider. "And no tellin' who they are once they lose theirselves in the crowds of a railroad boom town."

"Me and the bhoys will have our look, just the same," announced Callahan. "Shake a leg, buckos! We've got to get out of here."

THE paddies moved off, intent on moving every victim of the wreck up to the hand-cars. The Masked Rider drew Blue Hawk aside. As briefly as possible he told the Yaqui about Bannion

Twin scarlet splashes leaped from the Masked Rider's gun bores (CHAPTER X)

and his plan to masquerade as the trouble shooter.

"There's work for the Masked Rider here, Hawk," he whispered. "I aim to find out who's responsible for this wreck and others that have happened to construction trains. I like these fightin' Irishmen and they deserve a chance to know who they're buckin' so's they can battle in the open.

"We'll ride off now. When we get out of sight, I'll circle back through the brush and make my appearance as the missin' trouble shooter. You ride on to our camp beyond the northern rim of the canyon. I'll try to meet yuh there later tonight or tomorrow."

The Indian nodded, his dark eyes brightening with the anticipation of action which usually followed the Masked Rider's decision to plunge into some new campaign against organized lawlessness.

"If Senor needs help, he won't forget Hawk."

"Yuh know I won't."

The Masked Rider stopped Callahan and announced his intention of leaving.

"Sorry ye've got to go," said Callahan. "Shure an' ye were a help this day. If ye're ever needin' a friend call on Pat Callahan. Yez'll be after findin' me in one of Silver Bow's saloons."

The Masked Rider grinned. The gesture softened the granite cast to that part of his face which was visible below the mask. Blue Hawk came up with Midnight and the Masked Rider mounted. He and the Yaqui lifted their arms in farewell and galloped off. A sharp bend in Solo Canyon soon carried them out of sight of the laborers.

Shortly the Masked Rider pulled up and hastily discarded his black cloak, mask and sombrero. Underneath the cloak he wore a flannel shirt and plain black pants stuffed in dusty half-boots. From his blanket roll he took a battered gray hat and rolled up his Masked Rider clothing in the blanket behind Midnight's saddle.

He was now Wayne Morgan. In this guise he had often appeared as a wandering cowpuncher when necessity required the execution of certain acts which could not be accomplished in the identity of the Masked Rider.

His eyes were a steady, penetrating blue, matching the solid strength and purpose of the rest of his features.

Blue Hawk rode away, leading Midnight. Morgan swung about and ran back down the canyon, keeping to the thick brush which covered a good portion of the uneven gorge floor.

He came up to the wreck just as Callahan and the few workers he had designated to man the hand-cars were prepared to set off for Silver Bow.

Pausing only to smear his features with dirt, batter in the peak of his sombrero and rip one trouser leg, Morgan broke through the brush beyond the smashed locomotive and staggered into view. His head came up as he appeared to see the other men for the first time. He uttered a hoarse cry. Callahan came running to his side.

"Where did ye come from, bucko?" he asked.

Wayne Morgan weaved forward uncertainly. He kept his voice hoarse and strained.

"I'm Wayne Morgan—new trouble shooter," he mumbled.

"Shure an' we looked all over for yez," said the blunt-jawed Callahan. "Heard there was supposed to be an extra man ridin' with the engineer. Hurt bad?"

"Reckon not. Just knocked out. I jumped as the locomotive left the rails. Rolled down into a culvert and smashed my head against a rock. Yuh headin' for Silver Bow?"

"Yeah. It's welcome yez are to join us." He bawled at the other men. "Make room for one more and start pumpin', lads!"

WAYNE MORGAN squeezed into a place on the lead hand-car which carried four battered, moaning laborers besides Callahan and another man. Callahan bellowed the order to start, and the three hand-cars clattered along the rails toward the summit of the grade.

Darkness had laid its hand upon the land when the three hand-cars, loaded with weary and exhausted men, rattled up to the depot in Silver Bow.

The thick sky was overcast and winter's wind drilled down from the higher peaks. A switch engine, its bell clanging noisily, headlight spearing a path through the gloom, backed past and spotted a string of empties on a siding.

Two long material trains were on the main line, waiting to be shunted to end of track. Surplus ties and rails were

piled in rows along the tracks. Somewhere farther along another locomotive with a noisy exhaust set the rails to trembling as it rumbled forward.

Morgan helped carry the injured laborers across the yard and into the seething, bawling confusion that was the boom town of Silver Bow. He had a fleeting glimpse of a wide, rutted street lined by tent shops and saloons and an occasional flimsy board structure.

Lights flushed yellowly out into the street from the honkytonks, and the streets were already alive with paddies in from end of track. The flat, tinny crash of a band sent its thunder into the night, yet it was engulfed by the humming roar of voices, the intermittent yelling of barkers, trying to attract trade to the various saloons.

The injured laborers were deposited in a wide tent which Morgan learned belonged to a frontier doctor who was following the line of steel. He was finding steady business repairing broken heads after street brawls, or digging bullets from the bodies of victims of shooting scrapes.

When Callahan and the others left him, Morgan saw them make a rush for the two-story frame structure which housed the railroad offices. On the way they yelled the news of the wreck to their friends among the crowd.

It spread like wildfire. It was on every tongue. Ominous threats filled the night and a mob stormed toward the depot even before a giant of a man appeared in front of the railroad shack and sent out a call for volunteers to man a wrecking train.

In short order a special train was hooked up and five hundred eager section hands jumped on the flat-cars. The engineer jerked at the whistle cord, then the special snorted out of the depot and went jolting across switch frogs to disappear into the night.

Ramming his way through the seething throng, Wayne Morgan got to the railroad office and climbed the outside stairs to the second story. At the door marked "Division Superintendent" he rapped.

A gruff voice bade him enter.

Morgan shoved open the door. He found himself facing a bear of a man with a cigar clamped firmly between his strong teeth. He had been stalking up and down the room, his hands clasped behind his back. When he whirled, Morgan saw how big those hands were. They were the hands of a spiker, blunt and heavy and hard as granite.

Sharp gray eyes under heavy dark brows studied Morgan boldly, making their swift, sharp judgment of him.

"Are you Jim Brown?" Morgan asked.

"Yeah." The reply was curt—neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Then yuh're the man I want to see. I'm Wayne Morgan, yore new trouble shooter. I've got a letter from Colonel Darwin."

Brown snatched the extended letter from Morgan's hand. He merely glanced at it, then crumpled it into a ball. He was wearing a single long-barreled gun on his right hip and now his eyes lingered upon the two weapons Morgan carried.

"It's a tough job," he growled.

"So I've heard," said Morgan and showed Brown the edge of a reckless grin.

Brown was unimpressed. A frown creased his broad forehead. He was a bundle of energy—a man who got things done by the drive of his will and the steady thrust of his personality. There was little patience or tolerance about him.

"I see yuh carry two guns," Brown grunted.

His wide mouth stretched out to show the line of his teeth, yet that could not have been defined as a smile. There was something wary about this man who looked as if he seldom smiled.

CHAPTER IV

Trouble Shooter

BROWN was narrowly watching Morgan. And though his words were not a question, Morgan knew a question was implied.

"I can see what yuh're thinkin'," he said to the Wyoming & Western Division Superintendent. "The answer is that I wouldn't carry two guns if I couldn't use 'em."

Jim Brown lunged swiftly to one side, his hand digging for his gun. It came up in a blinding blur of speed. Yet it

never even reached the level of his belt, for he found himself staring into the twin black bores of Morgan's Colts.

"Testin' me out?" Morgan inquired casually. His manner was indolent, but subtly dangerous.

A grin, that proved Brown could smile, spread across his features. He holstered his gun.

"Not many men can shade me," he said. "Looks like you'll do. But as I said, it's a tough job and nobody to watch yore back."

"Meanin'?"

"That's how the two trouble shooters before you died." The grin was gone from Brown's face and stern impatience for action had taken its place. "Yuh're pretty much of a mess," he commented. "Reckon yuh was in that wreck in Solo Canyon."

"I was."

"That wreck was deliberate accordin' to Callahan. And he says when the Masked Rider showed up to help drag injured men out of the rubble that the Masked Rider's Indian pard found some lengths of fuse and some percussion caps up on the rim. There's a man I'd like to have for a trouble shooter." Brown broke off to add hastily, "No reflection on you. But that hombre is magic with guns and fists. If he comes in on our side, mebbe we've a chance to beat that Colorado Central bunch."

"Suppose yuh make things a little clearer," suggested Morgan.

"Colorado Central," explained Brown, "is buildin' seventy miles north of us and tryin' to beat us into Salt Lake, the only decent terminal for a railroad. The Government has granted subsidies and land to both lines, but only one road—the first to get there—can have its terminal there and reap the harvest of Mormon trade and traffic. The loser will have to push on into Nevada at a big additional cost. And by that time Government subsidies might run out — which would mean bankruptcy and plenty of loss to thousands of stockholders back East."

"You think Colorado Central would use underhanded means to win that race of steel?"

"They might. Bill Tracy, their trouble shooter and superintendent of maintenance, is nothin' but a two-bit gunman—capable of anything. But John Winston, a director and the chief engineer, has a good rep."

Jim Brown's scowl lent heaviness to his features. The responsibilities of his job were oppressive.

"That wreck in Solo Canyon will hold up all the material trains from Kansas City," he resumed evenly. "We're usin' a hundred cars of supplies a day and we'll need more'n that if we step up our rate to six miles of new track each day. That's why I sent a thousand laborers out to clean up the wreckage and reset the torn-up track. The material trains must be rollin' by dawn."

"Buildin' a railroad shore is a big job," Morgan observed laconically.

"Bigger'n you think," Brown said grimly. "It takes thousands of men in sawmills, lumber camps, steel mills, to supply the materials, and other thousands to handle the gradin', surveyin', dynamitin', the buildin' of trestles and actual layin' of steel.

"We've had trouble and can expect more. Who's behind it, I can't say. It might be Colorado Central or the gamblin' bunch that follers the railroad. Or it could be Big Ed Graham's cattlemen's combine."

"Them cowmen lose some of their graze? Is that the reason?"

"Yeah. But that ain't all. Graham has accused our meat hunters of shootin' and butcherin' some of his beef to feed the construction crews." Brown paused, and the grimness about his mouth became accentuated. "That could be just an excuse for stirrin' up trouble among our graders and spikers. Some of 'em have been actin' up because their pay is late this month."

WAYNE Morgan was thoughtful a moment, cataloguing all this information in his keen mind. When he lifted his head, his glance was sharp.

"Did yuh ever stop to think that mebbe somebody else is butcherin' Graham's cows and stirrin' up discontent among yore crews just to get the railroad and the ranchers fightin' each other?"

The division superintendent looked surprised, but he had a swift reply.

"That's somethin' to think about. If yuh're right, we've got to find out who that is."

Morgan was beginning to become impatient. The urge for action was made

stronger by the lusty, riotous sounds of Silver Bow that filtered through the thin walls of the office.

"I'm ready to start work," he said abruptly. "Any orders?"

Brown turned to the desk, planted his wide palms on a big surveying map showing the planned route of Wyoming & Western. His voice in giving his orders to Morgan was sharp and harsh.

"Watch the saloons. Pat Callahan and all the other paddies work hard up in the hills. When they come into town they're ready to cut loose—and I can't say I blame 'em. I want 'em to have their fun but I don't want 'em cheated by the gamblers, rolled for their money or killed in saloon riots.

"We've had several such riots. Other workers have been found dead in back alleys, their pockets looted. Silver Bow is filled with riffraff. Jess Brader—he runs the Empire with the help of gunmen like Ned Cresset—has the most say of the saloon owners. I don't trust Brader because he wants a wide-open town and has bucked me before. Your job will be to see that order is kept and that the graders and tie-layers and spikers get a square deal in Silver Bow."

Morgan's shoulders lifted carelessly and a hard grin replaced the gravity in his face.

"I've got a free hand?" he asked bluntly.

Brown nodded. "Yuh're the boss. If yuh have to break any heads or close up a few saloons, go right ahead. I'll back up anything yuh do. And if yuh need help, call on Callahan. But watch yoreself. The laborers will be yore friends, but for every one of them yuh'll find a saloon tough ready to bust yuh if he can."

Even before Brown had stopped talking, Morgan was at the door and had flung it open.

"Be seein' yuh," he said, and started down the rickety stairs into the roaring tumult that was the boom town of Silver Bow.

When he reached the bottom of the steps he paused at the edge of the mass of men which moved like a great tidal wave down the winding length of the main street. In that seething throng were buckskin-clad trappers, bowler-hatted drummers, lanky muleskinners, gamblers in white broadcloth shirts and black frock coats, steel-muscled railroad laborers and a few painted percentage girls bound for the honkytonks.

The frail, weather-blistered shacks and tents trembled under each savage gust of wind and flurries of dry snow drifted down out of the overcast sky.

A heavily-laden freighter, drawn by a double span of grays, rumbled through the ruts. Men dodged out of the way, cursing the yelling muleskinner. Three wagons were backed up against the loading platform of Gene Edmonton's general store, unloading barrels of flour, beans and molasses, and bolts of dry goods.

Every saloon was rocking with the raucous sounds of voices, the harsh clangor of dance bands, the rattle of dice, the shrill yells of barkers drumming up trade.

NEAR the depot a huge bonfire was blazing. In its light a half dozen men toiled with saw and hammer, slapping up the wooden framework of another store or saloon. Nearer, other men tugged at the guy ropes of a tent which threatened to blow away in the gale.

Eagerness for action himself gripped Morgan. He hitched up his belt, squared his shoulders and let himself be carried along with the crowd. There was a bright spark of anticipation in his eyes.

He moved in and out of several honkytonks with their portable bars, then paused in the wide opening of the Empire, the most pretentious saloon in Silver Bow. It boasted a hundred-foot bar, with fifteen bartenders sweating and toiling to serve up drinks to the ruddy-cheeked, bellowing railroad men who jostled each other.

Morgan stood to one side, watching with interest. All the gambling games were going. There was poker, faro, chuckaluck, roulette and red dog. Money passed back and forth across the green-baize-covered tables.

A seven-piece band playing from a raised platform at the far end of the saloon ended a number with a trumpeting flourish. Smiling girls in low-cut gowns and carefully curled hair turned from their whirling progress about the dance floor, slipped hands through the arms of their rugged, bearded partners, leading them to the crowded bar.

An aroused murmur of voices at one of the poker tables swung Morgan's attention around. He saw a squat, stocky spiker swallow the last of his drink, rake in a pile of money from the center of the table, then weave an uncertain path toward the door.

The slender, pale-cheeked gambler running the game lifted his head slowly. His glance went beyond the spiker to two swarthy, gun-hung men lounging near the entrance. The gambler gave them a barely perceptible nod. The two men grinned and turned out into the street in the wake of the lurching railroad worker.

Wayne Morgan's blood was racing as he pushed his way past two graders and sped out of the saloon. He was aware that he was about to undergo his first test as a trouble shooter for Wyoming & Western.

Determination was in his features and movement when he lengthened his stride to keep the gunmen in sight. They moved on past two intersections, turned down an alley.

Wayne Morgan started to run. At this point the crowd had thinned, but no one paid him any attention.

A mirthless grin broke across his lips when he heard the sounds of a scuffle. A cry of pain, a grunted exclamation, then a curse and the thump of blows.

Morgan hit the alley and ran down it. In the flickering shadows he saw that the spiker was down, his two attackers bending over him. They whirled at Morgan's approach.

One man's head tipped up, his face white against the darkness. His pointed chin was a perfect target for Morgan's knotted fist. The man fell and his companion dived at Morgan's knees. They went down in a threshing tangle. A knee drove into Morgan's side and flashes of fiery pain somersaulted through him.

The attacker plunged an elbow into Morgan's neck and a swinging fist set the trouble shooter's head to ringing. Morgan pulled up his legs, planted his boots in the man's middle and kicked him against the wall of the nearest building.

THE man struck the timbers with a jolting thud, slid down them. Morgan reared up and leaped forward instantly catching the fellow again with a swinging left. Morgan spun about, then, hearing the scuff of metal on leather. Orange red streamers of muzzle flame sped past his face as the other gunman, on his feet now, tried to break clear.

But the man tripped over the fallen paddy and sprawled headlong. Morgan smashed his booted heel down upon the man's wrist. The gunny howled in pain and his weapon clattered to the ground. Morgan got a hold on his coat, hauled him to his feet. Instantly the fellow, not yet subdued, butted Morgan in the chest, tried to gouge Morgan's eye.

It was wicked fighting, with no holds barred. Morgan kicked the man in the shins, then hit him on the Adam's apple with the edge of his hand and heard the man draw an agonized breath. The fellow staggered. Morgan stepped in fast, nailed him with a right. He steadied him with a jab, then sent him crashing on his back with a knock-out uppercut.

CHAPTER V

Warning to Jess Brader

WAYNE MORGAN was breathing very hard and there was blood on his knuckles when he reached the street and peered across the moving throng. He spotted Callahan and yelled to him. The construction foreman hewed a path for himself with his blocky shoulders, with five men following him.

"Yuh wanted me?" Callahan asked Morgan, grinning.

"Yeah—a little job for yuh." Morgan turned back down the alley.

"Bucko, yuh've started workin' already!" Callahan exclaimed in surprise, when he saw the spiker and the two gunmen. He turned over the spiker who was beginning to stir. "Heck, it's Luke Powers! How did he get here?"

"These two gunmen followed him from the Empire and beefed him. He was carryin' heavy poker winnin's."

Callahan swore and his big fist clenched.

"Jess Brader again! I'd like to get my hands on him!"

Morgan's chin lifted, and his voice was quiet, deadly.

"That's where I'm headed now, Pat. Better have two of yore boys help Powers over to the work train that'll be headin' for the boarding train at end of track at midnight. You and the rest carry these two jaspers to the Empire."

Callahan rubbed his hands gleefully, bending down to grab the shoulders of one of the prone gunmen roughly.

When Morgan and the railroad workers carrying two gunnies came out of the alley and moved toward the center of town, behind them marched a growing wedge of curious gandy-dancers. Some of Callahan's crew, remembering Morgan from Solo Canyon, called out to him. But he was looking straight ahead, his features rigid because of the pounding urge for action in retribution.

Reaching the Empire, they turned into the confusion there. Morgan's swinging shoulders made a path for the four men carrying the half-unconscious gunmen.

Talk dropped off and the band suddenly stopped playing, leaving couples stranded in the middle of the dance floor. Morgan was grim as he went straight across the saloon toward a door marked "Private." He grabbed the knob, gave a savage push on the panel. The door swung open on squealing hinges and he plunged through. One man inside spun about in a swivel chair, and another leaped up from a small table and placed himself solidly against the wall.

Morgan turned to Callahan and his three paddies.

"Drop 'em on the floor," he said curtly.

Callahan's challenging glance jumped to the man pressed against the wall. The foreman grinned at Morgan, then let go of the man he held by the shoulders. The paddy holding the gunny's feet relinquished his grip at the same time. Their limp burden hit the floor with an impact that shook the small room. The dropped man groaned and opened bleary, pain-racked eyes.

"A present for yuh," Morgan said to the man at the desk. He waved at Callahan. "Thanks, Pat. That's all."

"Heck, I thought we were—" began Callahan, but as Morgan's lips flattened, something in his expression made Callahan wheel and stride out.

The three railroad workers followed him, slamming the door.

THE man in the swivel chair, who Morgan judged was Jess Brader, said nothing. He was slender, with an over-long body and eyes that were dark against the pallor of his smooth skin. His glance, cool and inscrutable, never left Morgan. He seemed to be unmoved, but the muscles in his hands which gripped the arm-rests of his chair stood out in ridges. He didn't even bother to glance at his two prone gunmen.

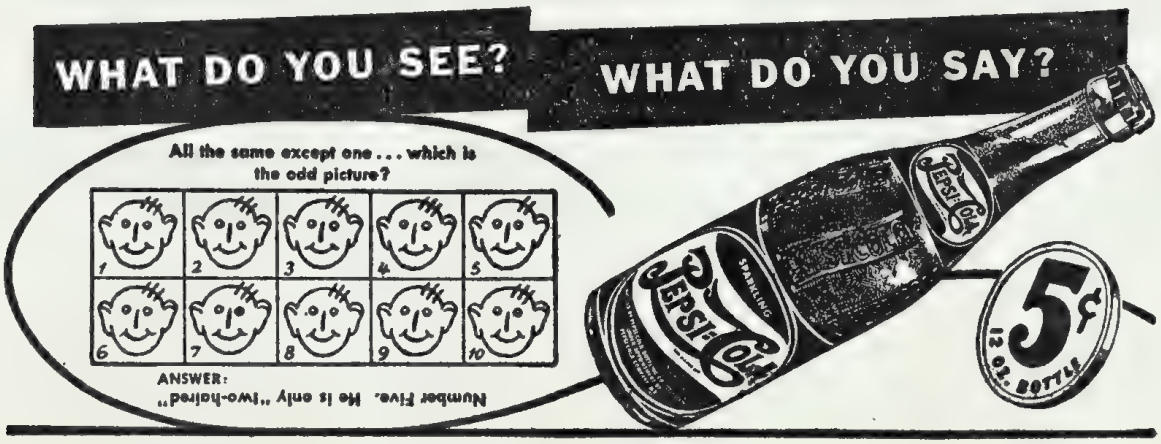
"The next time you come in here, don't forget to knock," he said.

The set line of Morgan's lips hardened.

"When and if I have any reason to see you again, Brader, I'll walk right in!"

Brader stiffened. Something deadly and venomous showed in his eyes. It put a yellowish glitter there. Morgan saw it even while he watched the taut figure of the other man who, he guessed, was Ned Cresset, a dour-faced individual with a flattened nose and eyes that were green and sly and shrewd.

"Who in blazes are you?" Brader demanded, lifting his voice to a higher pitch in his sudden anger. [*Turn page*]



"The name is Wayne Morgan. That's not important. What is important is that I'm the new trouble shooter for Wyoming and Western." A hot flame danced in his eyes and he gestured toward the floor. "Better give yore two hoodlums money to take the next train back East or tell 'em to hit the ties. I caught 'em tryin' to beat up a construction hand and steal his poker winnin's."

An indolent smile flicked Jess Brader's lip corners. His hatred for this man was plain, but his expression remained bland, even faintly amused. He spoke to one gunman who was sitting up now, shaking his head to clear the fog from his brain.

"That true, Ellers?"

"No," came the hoarse reply. "We was walkin' down the alley and found this jasper"—he pointed at Morgan—"holdin' a gun on the paddy and goin' through his pockets."

"Yuh see?" Brader shrugged.

Morgan's temper flared up. He moved toward the sitting gunman, his fist balled in a tight knot.

"Mebbe yore boys need another lesson," he shot at Brader.

"Hold off, Morgan!" growled Ned Cresset.

Morgan whirled, boots planted wide, arms hooked above his tied-down holsters. Cresset had his gun half out of the holster, but couldn't tear his eyes from Morgan's face, for he saw the implacable will and purpose there. Slowly he let the gun drop back into place.

"All right," agreed Morgan softly, and backed a pace to put Brader, Cresset and the other two men into his full line of vision.

His personality was a compelling force in this room. These men before him could read how dangerous he was, primed for trouble, eager for it.

And even his unspoken challenge to them was uncompromising. For already he had seen enough of this town, of the lusty men who were building the railroad, of the hardcases who frequented the saloons, to know that he had to be tougher than any of them to survive. He must come out on top in this or any trouble that might arise.

Once a man backed down in this trouble shooter's job, he realized, he was finished. And Morgan never backed down. Many times he had thrown caution to the winds. He had now. Cresset saw that and the knowledge made him uncertain of what his own actions should be.

"Get these two gunnies out of Silver Bow," Morgan repeated. "If I see them again I'll kill 'em." His words lashed at Brader, bringing a quick flame of color into the gambler's pale cheeks. "They work for you. They take yore orders. If yore orders are to cheat the railroad workers and roll them for their hard-earned pay, you ain't goin' to be in business long."

RAGE shook Brader visibly. He was accustomed to wielding power. His pride, his stubbornness would countenance no interference in his activities.

"Tough, ain't yuh?" he said, white-lipped.

Morgan nodded. "And I can get tougher."

"That's a poor way to stay alive," Brader drawled.

"Yuh threatenin' me?"

"No." The smile was back on Brader's lips, a false smile that was humorless. "But yuh might like to know that the last two trouble shooters went out of the boom towns on a board, full of lead."

Morgan's hard gray eyes in the granitelike cast of his bronzed face bored into the gamblers.

"Did you supply the boards, or the lead?" he asked.

"Neither," Brader said smoothly. "But a man can make a heap of enemies in a boom town like this. Don't be a fool. The workers come here to raise Cain and spend their money. What's it matter whether they spend it on cards, liquor or women?"

"It don't—just so's yuh keep yore games straight and give the men a square deal," Morgan said flatly. "I understand there's been trouble among the crews in addition to the wreckin' of several supply trains."

Brader made a wry grimace.

"Too bad. But yuh got to expect such things."

"I hope you had no hand in 'em," said Morgan.

Brader's temper suddenly burst its bonds. He stormed up from his chair and whipped aside the tails of his black

coat to reveal an ivory-butted gun at his right hip.

"Clear out, Morgan!" he shouted. "I've taken enough from you."

Morgan's jaw knotted. And again there was grim challenge in his eyes and in the words he lashed at Brader.

"There'll be more if you and the other saloon owners don't toe the line. Remember, if I spot any crooked gamblin' or see any of yore bartenders feedin' knockout drops to the paddies, I'll have this place torn down over yore head!"

A brief silence fell upon the room in which the quick, harsh breathing of these men could be heard. An unspoken threat of violence made the stale air suddenly hot and oppressive. It pressed on the saloon man's raw nerves, drove hot words from him.

"Get out, Morgan," he growled, "before I lose my temper!"

Brader was trembling with fury, dangerous at this moment, but so was Morgan who answered him softly.

"Any time, Brader. You call it."

A tawny flash glittered in Brader's eyes.

"Get out!" he repeated hoarsely.

Morgan backed to the door, opened it carefully. He paused there, and Brader was aware of the contempt in which this brash trouble shooter held him.

"How wide is that streak down yore back?" Morgan demanded, turned and stalked out into the turbulent saloon.

The noise of the band and the roar of talk swelled against the frail walls of the Empire. Percentage girls whirled about on the dance floor with their stumbling partners, and the bar was three-deep with thirsty, clamoring gandy dancers.

Somewhere a gambler was calling for bets and a roisterous track-layer was challenging any tie-cutter or grader in the place to a fight.

MORGAN caught sight of Jim Brown's broad back at the edge of the crowd and cut over that way. Other pushing men got in his way, but he could see that Brown had cornered a man almost his equal for height and breadth. Behind this second man were grouped four sober, unsmiling cowhands in regulation range garb.

Brown said something that Morgan didn't catch.

"I heard about that wreck in Solo Canyon," the other man answered. "Tough luck."

"You shore yuh don't know anythin' about it, Graham?" Brown demanded, thrusting his jutting jaw almost into the other man's face. "Nothin' would give yuh more pleasure than to see us busted, I reckon."

The man Wayne Morgan realized at once must be "Big Ed" Graham, the rancher, pushed Brown away from him. Graham was big and blond. His high cheek-bones were covered with a fine stubble of light beard and his eyes were blue and cold. He had a cleft chin, and a rather full underlip gave him a touch of truculence. It was obvious from his manner that he was not a tolerant man, and that he was as firm-willed as Brown.

"Watch yore tongue, railroad man," he growled. "Yuh make big tracks in Silver Bow, but they don't scare me. All the railroad will do for me will be to make it easier to ship cattle to Kansas City markets. But I'll be blasted if I want a railroad at the expense of losin' ten thousand acres of free graze that the Government handed to Wyomin' and Western on a platter. Mebbe I could even stand that. But if yuh think I'm goin' to let yore professional meat hunters go on shootin' and butcherin' my cows yuh're in for plenty trouble. I lost twenty more steers last night."

Jim Brown's mouth worked savagely. He was oblivious to the men crowding around him, to the threat in the faces of Graham and his sober-eyed punchers.

"Railroad guns ain't downin' yore critters!" he declared. "My hunters are roamin' far to the north, hittin' the antelope bands in the higher hills."

"So you say," retorted Graham, with an unrelenting frown. "Let me give yuh this warnin'. From now on my punchers will be double-guardin' my herds. We'll shoot on sight if anybody tries to run off more steers!"

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk Battle to Bring Peace Between Nesters and Cattlemen in DEAD MAN'S RANCH, complete novel by LARRY A. HARRIS next issue!

CHAPTER VI

Undercurrents of Trouble

PAT CALLAHAN had gathered a reckless bunch of track-layers behind him as soon as he had seen Brown in altercation with Big Ed Graham, and with the rancher's cold-eyed waddies backing him up. Callahan came storming through the crowded saloon, pushing up behind the division superintendent. His yell pierced the din.

"Just say the word, Mr. Brown, and me and the bhoys'll give Graham and his hay-shakers a goin' over that'll make 'em think *they* was in that wreck in the canyon!"

Wayne Morgan leaped in front of Callahan, shoved him back, and stood braced in front of him.

"Stay out of this, Pat," he advised. He flashed a brief smile, but there was an authoritative ring in his voice. "There's been enough trouble for one night. Take your boys out of here."

For an instant Ed Graham fixed his sharp gaze on Morgan, then swung his attention back to Brown.

"Who is that jigger?" he queried, with a curt nod toward Morgan.

"Wayne Morgan, our trouble shooter." Brown's heavy hand propelled Morgan around as he made the introduction. "We aim to keep order in town and along the tracks," Brown added. "It's up to Morgan's fists and guns to do it."

"Keep the railroad's meat hunters off my beef and yuh'll earn yore pay," Graham said coldly, and motioned to the punchers behind him.

"Why, yuh blasted—"

Brown made a wild lunge for Graham, but Morgan held him back.

"Wait!" shouted Morgan. "Mebbe Graham has been losin' beef."

"Mebbe he has," growled Brown, "but the railroad has nothin' to do with it."

His glare held until Graham and his Flying G cowhands had bucked the seething crowd to pile out through the saloon's exit.

Smoke hung in the air in thick blue layers. The place was filled with the reek of whisky and sawdust and fresh, unseasoned wood.

Brown glanced at Wayne Morgan, jerked his head toward the street, and together they moved out into the unending stream of traffic and walked down toward the depot. At the foot of the stairs to Brown's office the super spun around. His voice boomed over the heads of a dozen spikers.

"Hold on, Tracy! And you, too, Winston!"

Wondering what Brown could be up to now, Morgan struck out after him and reached him as Brown drew two men aside into the alley opening.

"What you doin' in Silver Bow, Winston?" Brown demanded.

Bland gray eyes peering out of a round, moonlike face, shoulders broad and stocky, and a manner that was serene. This was John Winston, Chief Engineer of Colorado Central. He wore a silk hat on his thinning black hair and the tightness of his frock coat and striped trousers accentuated his slight paunch.

"Just checkin' up on the progress of the opposition," Winston drawled carelessly. He removed a big cigar from his mouth, made a round O of his mouth and blew out a ring of smoke. "Wild town yuh've got here. Plenty of men workin', too—but all a waste of time. Yuh'll never beat Colorado Central into Salt Lake, Brown."

"Yuh seem mighty shore of yoreself," growled Brown. "Mebbe yuh're makin' it yore business to see that Colorado Central wins—one way or another! You and Bill Tracy here, and mebbe some others."

"What yuh mean by that?" cut in the man indicated as Bill Tracy, Colorado Central's trouble shooter.

TRACY had a long, pear-shaped face and matted brick-red hair beneath a battered sombrero. There was power in the wide span of his shoulders and arrogance in the thrust of his prominent jaw. He glared hotly at Brown and Morgan.

"Brown's talkin' about the wreck in Solo Canyon," put in Morgan, "and wonderin' if you fellers know anythin' about it."

"Why, yuh two-bit boomer!" yelled Tracy and slid a hand toward his gun.

Morgan leaped. His arm shot out and came down against Tracy's wrist, spilled

BLUE HAWK

the gun from the man's fingers. A quick thrust of a booted toe sent the weapon skidding into the alley.

"Mebbe yuh'd better clear out of Silver Bow before yuh get hurt," Morgan suggested softly—and dangerously.

Anger flamed in Bill Tracy's blue eyes, sent hot blood flooding into his cheeks.

"Yuh're still a boomer!" he rasped. "And there'll be another time."

John Winston laughed, plucked at Tracy's arm with a soft, fat hand.

"Easy, Bill," he murmured. "They're just on the prod. They've had a dose of hard luck."

Jim Brown was scowling. His heavy, penetrating stare pinned the Colorado Central engineer.

"There ain't no law says yuh can't come to Silver Bow," he stated finally. "But here's a warnin'. My crews are pretty ringy and primed for fight. Better not let 'em spot yuh here. Mebbe yore line knows nothin' about the wrecks and strikes and riots that have been delayin' our construction. But it's all-fired queer I haven't heard of Colorado Central runnin' into that kind of trouble."

Winston's bland serenity was not disturbed. But his oily voice seemed to mock Brown when he answered.

"We don't need to do anything underhand to beat you, Brown. We're layin' down six miles of track a day and we'll soon have it up to seven. Try and beat that if yuh can. Though if yuh took my advice yuh could save yore investors a heap of grief and money by quittin' before yuh find yoreself forced to lay steel across the Nevada desert."

Winston and Tracy moved off toward the street crowd then. But Tracy swung around once to let the full heat of his glance rest upon Morgan. It warned Morgan that he had made one more enemy, and that the longer he remained here, the greater would become the desire of some to destroy him.

That night Wayne Morgan hired a livery horse and rode out to the camp he and Blue Hawk had established before they had come upon the wreck.

He found the Yaqui stolidly waiting for him, and wasted no time in revealing his plans for the coming days. All during the lonely journey to the hideout Morgan had been turning over in his mind the problem of the railroad and its monumental task of winning the race of steel.

He had considered the three possible agents of opposition to Wyoming & Western—Jess Brader and the saloon men; Colorado Central; and Ed Graham's cattle faction. He was definitely suspicious of Brader, and of Bill Tracy also, who looked like a cold-blooded killer.

He was inclined to trust Ed Graham. The rancher was bluff, hot-tempered, intolerant and hard-willed, yet he had seemed sincere. Raids could have been made on his cattle. To make certain of the rancher, Morgan outlined his plan to have Blue Hawk brace Graham for a cowpunching job.

"It's important to find out how Graham stands, Hawk," urged Morgan. "If you get a job, keep yore eyes and ears open and watch for any riders he may send out on mysterious missions. He might be buckin' the railroad. And if there are any raids on his beef let me know."

"If I see anything, Senor, I will find some way of riding into town," promised the Yaqui.

"Now I think we'd better move camp west of Silver Bow so it'll be closer to town and also closer to Graham's ranch headquarters," said Morgan.

ACCORDINGLY, they packed up and led Midnight, Morgan's hammerhead roan, and Blue Hawk's gray across the rough, rocky country, Morgan riding the livery horse and the Yaqui astride his pinto. It was after eleven when they located a cave at the end of a small, brush-covered coulee, with plenty of graze nearby for the horses.

An hour later Wayne Morgan was back in Silver Bow. . . .

He was up at dawn, riding out on the first construction train. A small army of assorted track-layers, spikers, gaugers, and ballast men crowded a few empty flats as the long train rattled up a grade through country that grew steadily rougher.

Reaching end of track, the workers piled off. A supply train loaded with rails pulled onto the main line from a siding. Black smoke poured from the locomotive stack, steam jetted from every pounding cylinder.

Morgan studied the evenly spaced line of freshly planted ties that marched on over the next ridge into the blue distance, following the seared, scooped-out right of way. Pat Callahan was bellowing orders and men were streaming toward the tool shacks, grabbing up mauls and sledges and tamping bars.

Following arrangements made by Jim Brown, Morgan went to a rough rope corral which held a score of saddle horses.

He picked out a big chestnut, saddled it, and rode off along the line of ties.

After a twelve-mile ride he reached Harlow Creek where Dell Bachelor's bridge and culvert gang was at work, finishing the vast skeletonlike framework of the wooden trestle which spanned the gorge.

He dropped out of the saddle to introduce himself to Bachelor.

"Yuh'll have to speed up all yuh can, Bachelor," he warned. "Callahan's bunch is crowdin' right on yore heels with track. When they get here Brown wants 'em to be able to keep right on goin' before they catch up with us!"

"We'll be finished here by tonight," growled Bachelor, "and we'll be movin' on to Miller's Canyon ten miles beyond the next town site at Beaver Wells."

Morgan swung aboard the chestnut and rode on. When he passed through Beaver Wells, he saw that men already were at work sawing and hammering, erecting the first of the flimsy structures which would be waiting for the thirsty army of railroad hands by the time steel reached that point.

He covered another fifteen miles by mid-afternoon and halted at the big grading camp. Here private contractors with teams of powerful horses and mules dragged great steel scoops through freshly scarred earth, chopping at brush-covered hillsides and flattening out a broad right of way for the tie-setters moving up fast behind them.

Morgan stressed the need for speed and more speed, then announced that another hundred men would be out in the morning to push the grading operations.

He was tired from the long ride, from the steady lash of the bitter winter wind which had been cutting into his face during the entire journey. But he was anxious to return to Silver Bow, so he switched his saddle to another horse and started back.

CHAPTER VII

End of Track

LONG after nightfall Wayne Morgan reached Dell Bachelor's bridge camp. He found a place to sleep in one of the tents but was up again at dawn and riding on. It was another raw, cold day with the sky filled with dark, fleecy clouds and the threat of snow in the damp, roughening wind.

At eight o'clock the squat, tin-roofed tool shacks and warehouses that lined end of track took shape before him. A material train stood idle on the rails. No smoke came from the stack, and there was no harsh clang of steel on steel, no bellowing voices of men, none of the confusion and tumult of construction.

Then he saw the reason. The track-layers and spikers were milling around, listening to the shouted words of some speaker who kept waving his arms for emphasis.

Trouble, thought Wayne Morgan. He felt his muscles tighten, then go loose with the readiness for action. Clods of dry earth spurted from beneath his pony's hoofs as he kicked the animal into a run. Brawny, grim-eyed workers swung around at his approach. As Morgan pulled in his horse, he caught several sentences of the speaker's tirade.

"Don't be fools, men! Yore pay is already a week late. Why go on layin' track if yuh don't know if yuh'll ever get the *dinero* yuh've sweated for? Back in K. C. there's rumors that Wyomin' and Western is about busted! The investors are actin' up. Where'll you be then? To blazes with Callahan or Jim Brown! Lay down yore tools—"

That was more than enough for Morgan. He was off his horse before the mount had stopped, planting his boots wide to skid to a halt. He saw the speaker looking over the heads of the crowd, mockery twisting his lips. The orator was Bill Tracy.

Cold anger shot through Morgan. His rigid lips were a pale line against the thundercloud of his face. Tracy seemed to be eagerly waiting for him—with two gun-hung toughs at his elbow.

But Morgan's rage was greater than his caution. Furiously he shoved big, bulky spikers and track-layers aside until he reached Tracy, where he stopped, breathing hard.

"Looks like Colorado Central is dabbin' a wide loop," he snapped, a metallic ring in his voice. "Yuh had my warnin' in town, Tracy. Now yuh've gone too far."

Tracy sneered. In his eyes the glint of mockery was accentuated.

"What I said goes," he drawled. "Yuh're still a two-bit boomer."

Wayne Morgan knew then that the time for action had come. This was show-down—with a silent Wyoming & Western crew at his back, waiting to see what he would do.

Morgan never hesitated. And once again the speed of his movements took Tracy by surprise. He threw himself at the man to Tracy's left, drove a shoulder into the fellow's chest and knocked him into the other man. Both men crashed to earth, upsetting a few paddies as they fell.

Morgan came directly at Tracy without a breath of delay. A looping left found Tracy's jaw-bone. It lifted him two inches off the ground, dropped him flat on his back.

Cursing, Tracy rolled and made a lightning stab for his gun. It flashed upward. There was the flat bark of a weapon. But no smoke curled from Tracy's Colt. The shot came from a long-barreled .45 in Morgan's muscular hand. That bullet clanged off Tracy's gun, sent it spinning away.

There was a shout behind Morgan. He whirled. One of Tracy's partners rushed him, a gun clubbed in his fist. Morgan sidestepped. He took a glancing blow on the shoulder, and struck savagely with his gun. The barrel cracked down on the man's forehead, the sharp sight raked down his nose, gouging a bloody furrow to his lower lip.

THE man groaned and collapsed. But Tracy was getting up, trying to come in at Morgan from the left. Morgan heaved himself on the other trouble shooter, bore him back to the ground. A knee slammed into Morgan's stomach. A fist pounded the back of his neck.

Then he smashed Tracy's nose with a hard left. A swinging arm knocked Morgan's gun out of his hand, but he split

Tracy's lip, drove two teeth down the man's throat with another savage blow. Then he grabbed him by the ears, belted his head against the ground.

He was doing that when a booted toe struck his ribs. A gusty breath spilled from his lungs. Hot slivers of pain skidded up and down his side as he saw the dark flash of two boots above him, coming down to crush his chest. He kept on rolling. One of those boots hit him glancingly. Then his big hands trapped an ankle and pulled his third attacker joltingly to the ground.

Morgan's ribs still felt as if they were on fire and all his muscles were beginning to ache. The man he had felled had had the wind knocked out of him. But he was fighting to get his knees under him, trying to swing around to meet Morgan.

Morgan, all thoughts of mercy gone now, climbed to his feet and rushed the man. He got a hold on his attacker's belt and the seat of his pants and hefted him above his head. It took a tremendous, straining effort, but he whirled the fellow above him, then tossed him down on top of the huddled forms of Tracy and the other gunman.

Panting, he stood over the three, his head drooping, his shirt ripped and hanging out over his pants. There was a bruise on his right cheek. Two of the knuckles on his right hand were skinned. He sucked in great gulps of air, conscious all the while that the paddies had made no sound or movement.

Then one of them yelled. That broke the tension. Everyone started to talk and shout at once. Morgan lifted his head. They had been discontented when he had arrived and willing to listen to Tracy's tirade. But now their belligerence was gone, and the way they were grinning was a deep satisfaction to Wayne Morgan.

A broad-chested spiker with heavy arms and a fight-scarred face came up. Admiration brightened his bloodshot eyes.

"Good glory, Morgan!" he whispered. "Three men."

"You almost killed 'em," called another.

Morgan made no reply. He still was under a strain even though he was aware that he had won these men over to his side. They were a rough bunch who loved a fight, and he had handled this in the one way they could understand.

Tracy was stirring on the ground. Moans issued from his throat. His nose was lost in the blood that covered his face. He glared at Morgan, but he was too weak to talk.

"Some of you huskies load these three men on one of them empty flat-cars," Morgan directed. He added bitterly: "And if any of yuh feel like quittin' get out right now. Take that empty supply train back to Silver Bow, or hit the ties. It's work or quit. As for yore pay, Jim Brown told me yesterday it's due in tonight."

"Come on, men!" yelled the broad-chested spiker. "We've lost two hours! We've got steel to lay."

That decided the crew. They made a wild rush toward the tool shacks. Only a handful of men who had the appearance of Border riffraff remained hostile. These tramped off and jumped on the waiting empty train.

FROM the big spiker Morgan learned that Callahan had been held in town for a conference with Brown. Evidently it hadn't taken Tracy long to find out Callahan would be away, and to capitalize on that by trying to stir up trouble. Morgan wondered if Tracy had been acting on Winston's orders.

Within fifteen minutes end of track was its usual bedlam of sound and activity. A long material train chuffed up along the rails. Half a dozen bulky, high-wheeled freight wagons began loading supplies. They would rumble on along the right of way, some bound for the distant grading camps, others going straight to the Mormon towns.

Bell clanging, couplings jolting noisily, the empty material train steamed off. In the distance a dark column of smoke lifted to the sky and the eerie, banshee wail of a locomotive whistle announced the approach of another supply train.

Piles of steel and ties lined the tracks and now a material train pushed up to the very end of track. Laborers swarmed on top of the flat-cars, began loading rails on a big flat-bed wagon pulled by a team of strong bays. The driver flicked his whip and the wagon trundled off, halting a short distance beyond the puffing locomotive.

Other men rushed up to the lowered tail-board of the wagon. Four laborers took hold of each rail. Eight men made a team. They dropped the rails on the ties. The gaugers knelt and quickly lined up the new rails. Then the spikers came forward, swinging their heavy sledges. After them followed the bolters and the ballast men.

All were moving with furious speed, and the activity got into Morgan's blood, put a light in his eyes.

The rail gang was dumping two more lengths into place when Morgan came up.

"I saw John Winston of Colorado Central in town the other night," he told the men. "He was braggin' that Wyomin' and Western would never beat him into Salt Lake. He said they was layin' six miles of track a day." Morgan's voice beat at these men vibrantly. "*I* say we can make it eight. How about it, men?"

A roar of approval was his answer, and Morgan pitched in to work himself. He grabbed up a maul and drove a heavy blow upon the head of an iron spike. . . .

They laid eight miles of track by quitting time that night. Morgan, working like a beaver, made that possible. He was glad he had spent several months in railroad construction work once before when the Masked Rider had been gathering evidence against a lawless combine.

No man worked harder during those long hours than did Wayne Morgan. But when darkness came he knew he had Callahan's paddies solidly behind him and that he'd helped set the pace for new and greater construction records to come. Even though unaccustomed muscles protested at the grueling toil.

It was a tired, exhausted bunch of men who dropped off the construction train in Silver Bow that night. But they were gay and boisterous, too, with a thirst in their throats and cheerful grins on their dirt-grimed faces.

Their first stop was the railroad pay-car on the siding. From there they rushed toward restaurants and saloons that poured yellow light out across the street's brown dust.

Morgan was on his way to the office when a young surveyor told him that Jim Brown wanted to see him in a hurry.

Morgan had good news for the division superintendent and was anxious to report the success of his mission to the grading and track camps. But with this urgent summons from Brown he felt an uneasiness for a reason he could not define, submerge his satisfaction over his report. It was a vague suspicion that something was wrong, but what, he could not guess.

RAPPING on the flimsy wooden panels of Brown's office door, Morgan entered at the super's gruff command. Instantly the barrel of a gun was rammed into his back and he found himself facing a strangely hostile Brown.

"Come in, Morgan!" snapped Brown. "Yuh're just the jasper we want to see."

"What's the idea?" Morgan demanded angrily, as his guns were lifted from their holsters.

A middle-aged man with graying hair and a strong face marked by prominent cheek-bones over which the skin was stretched as taut as a drum, stepped around Morgan. There was a gun in his fist and he threw Morgan's Colts to the floor. The man was dressed well, but the dust and soot of recent travel was on his well-tailored clothes.

"There's the idea—lying on that bench over there!" this man said, and there was a brittle, paper-thin quality about his speech. His eyes were hard and unfriendly. "Ever see that man before?"

Morgan glanced to the bench under the window. He was accustomed to shock, but could not repress a start when he saw the bloody, dusty, lifeless figure sprawled there.

"Jack Bannion!" Morgan exclaimed. And in a flash he could realize his own compromising position. He looked up at Brown. Taciturn and grim, Brown nodded toward the gray-haired man.

"He's Colonel Darwin, Chief Engineer of the road," said Brown.

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CHAPTER VIII

Morgan Is Exposed

DARWIN faced Morgan squarely and his brown eyes probed deeply into the blue ones of the trouble shooter.

"I'm the man who gave Jack Bannion a letter addressed to Jim Brown," Darwin said, a tremor of rage in his voice. "But the man who arrived with that letter answers to the name of Wayne Morgan."

Abruptly Darwin lost all semblance of calm.

"Just who are you?" he rasped. "What's your game in Silver Bow? Who sent you here? Ed Graham, Jess Brader, or that blasted Colorado Central crowd? Talk fast! If you've got a story it better be good."

With an effort, Wayne Morgan kept his temper. These men had a right to be angry, to be upset by the finding of Bannion's body.

"If yuh've got an explanation, let's hear it," snapped Brown. "Some paddies cleanin' up the last of the mess in Solo Canyon found Bannion half-covered with rocks in a culvert."

"Yuh've got a right to be suspicious of me," admitted Morgan, wondering how he could have neglected to have a logical story ready for such an emergency as this. "I'd hooked a ride behind the tender of that supply train when it stopped for water back in Hondo. I was hopin' to pick up a job with the railroad. When the landslide started I was thrown into the culvert. I came to and found Bannion beside me, half-dead, and covered with dirt and rubble.

"He'd been smashed up by a section of steel boiler from the locomotive. He was babblin' about a Jim Brown and a note in his pocket. I found the note. Since I was at a loose end, I figgered I'd try to land Bannion's job. That's why I substituted the names in the letter."

Darwin's expression was cold and contemptuous.

"You're a two-faced liar," he stated bluntly. "If anybody was to ask me," he went on, "I'd say you're a spy hired to delay Wyoming and Western. You're probably one of the mob that dynamited the canyon. Somebody got wind of Bannion coming to Silver Bow and you were on hand to take his place after the wreck."

Jim Brown looked troubled. He cleared his throat and lifted a protesting hand at the chief engineer.

"Wait, Colonel," he said. "I'll admit Morgan was wrong in takin' Bannion's letter. But he's shore done one good job for the road already. He put a wedge in Jess Brader's power, downin' two of his hoodlums in a fight after they'd beefed Luke Powers."

"Stay out of this, Jim," ordered Darwin. "I'm remembering, too, that you were telling me about the Masked Rider showing up right after the wreck. The Masked Rider is an outlaw, and for all we know this fellow is a close friend of his."

Morgan was smiling, amused. Yeah, he was a pretty close pard of the Masked Rider's all right.

"Would that masked man have helped clear up the mess and pull out the injured, or would he have sent his Indian pardner to find definite proof that the wreck was caused by dynamite, if he was crooked?" demanded Brown.

"His idea might have been to make you think he was on the level."

Brown shook his head stubbornly.

"Nope. From all the stories I've heard about the Masked Rider I believe he's a square shooter who helps folks in trouble."

"Forget it," snapped Darwin, a most unpleasant expression on his thin, ascetic face. He looked at Morgan and added: "You were mighty careful about covering up Bannion's body so it wouldn't be found."

"I know," said Morgan. "I realize now I should have applied openly for the job and told Brown about findin' Bannion."

"But you didn't. I've had enough crookedness and intrigue on this railroad! We've bucked it for months. It's going to stop if I have to spend all my time in this blasted town to clean up the mess myself! My first step is to find out who's behind the trouble. You going to talk, Morgan?"

MORGAN had been studying Colonel Darwin. Now he fully realized that nothing he could say would convince this man he had taken the step

he had in good faith. Nevertheless, he made another attempt.

"I've told the truth," he insisted. "Nobody hired me for anything, and I had no part in that wreck."

"Was it Bill Tracy or Jess Brader?" demanded Darwin. "Perhaps your move against Brader was another part of a clever trick. First time I ever heard of Brader and Cresset both being bluffed at the same time by *one* man."

"There's always a first time," Morgan told him bluntly. "It just takes a little sand."

"You sure you don't mean it takes working on the same deal with friends?" Darwin was implacable in his accusation. Again he barked: "What's your game?"

"There is no game."

"All right." Darwin's face set. Watching him, Morgan knew that the chief engineer had reached some grim decision. "Maybe after I hand you over to the construction workers and tell them you're an impostor, you'll feel more like talking. Only it'll be too late then. The paddies have their own way of handling traitors."

Jim Brown's head came up, his eyes widening. He stared at Darwin as if he couldn't believe the engineer meant what he was saying. But Darwin's lips were drawn, his manner uncompromising.

His hand whitened around the gun he held. Its barrel came level with Morgan's chest. The flickering lamplight seemed to accent the threat of peril that tingled Morgan's nerves, a threat that was real and disturbing.

"Turn around and head for the door, Morgan!" Darwin gestured imperiously with his gun. "You're on your way out —on the end of a rope."

* * *

The same morning that Wayne Morgan rode out to the Wyoming & Western grading camps, Blue Hawk put in an appearance at Ed Graham's Flying G Ranch.

It was a rough mountain spread with plenty of good graze in the lower meadows. The rambling log buildings were well kept and a fine bunch of broncs capered around in a stout corral a hundred yards from the bunkhouse.

Before he reached the low-railinged veranda three or four punchers strolled out of the barn and came up to the house, watching him carefully. Blue Hawk studied them with inscrutable eyes. They were proddy, and suspicious of all strangers.

A big man with a heavy shock of blond hair on his massive head flung open the front door of the ranchhouse and strode to the veranda steps. Ed Graham, the Yaqui knew, from Wayne Morgan's description of the rancher.

"Lookin' for somethin'?" he asked curtly.

"A job," said Blue Hawk.

A bald, bowlegged man with yellowed teeth shifted a cud of chewing tobacco in his mouth and spat beneath the Yaqui's horse.

"We need cowhands," he observed, "but we don't want Injuns."

Blue Hawk stared at the bowlegged man until the man dropped his gaze.

"Don't butt in, Harker," ordered Graham.

The rancher was a shrewd judge of men. He had already been impressed by the Yaqui's dignity, and now by the way in which he stared down Harker, as well as by his stolid indifference to the hostility of the other punchers.

"We can use another hand," he said, "but it'll be at fightin' pay. That change yore mind any about wantin' a job?"

"No."

GRAHAM'S voice turned harsh. "We're buckin' the railroad," he growled, "and I've got reason to believe their hunters have been stealin' and butcherin' my beef. I aim to stop it if I have to wage a wholesale war against the steel gang!"

"Heck of a lot of fightin' this Injun will do with only a knife in his belt," the bowlegged man sneered. "Can yuh handle a six-gun, redskin?"

Blue Hawk didn't smile and he didn't lift his voice to reply.

"I don't like six-guns," he said. "I prefer the knife and my rifle."

"In a fast fight at close quarters yuh'd be no good to us with a rifle."

Abruptly Blue Hawk's pose of stolid patience left him. He bent low in the saddle toward the upthrust butt of the Winchester reposing in the specially rigged scabbard. The Flying G punchers caught just a brief blur of the rifle spearing upward. Then there was a flash of flame, a mushroom of smoke and the

bowlegged cowhand's sombrero sailed off his head.

One of the other punchers retrieved it, staring wide-eyed at the bullet puncture in the battered crown. The bowlegged man's face turned the color of ashes. Then anger flamed, and with a loud yell he clawed for his six-gun.

"Hold everythin', Harker," snapped Ed Graham. He saw the mingled amazement and anger on Harker's face, and suddenly peals of laughter boomed from the depths of his chest.

"Why, that blasted Injun might have killed me!" howled Harker.

"I reckon not," said Graham. "That was rifle shootin' if I ever saw it. Any jasper that can handle a Winchester like this Indian does don't need a six-gun. Pull in yore horns, Harker. Yuh shore asked for that play."

The faintest shadow of a smile lifted the corners of Blue Hawk's mouth. He had figured the right play here all right.

"Climb down and make yoreself at home," invited Graham. "Yuh've earned a job at the Flying G."

Graham made him acquainted with the rest of the crew. Harker continued to act resentful, because a severe blow had been dealt to his pride, but the others accepted the Yaqui calmly enough. In fact, they treated him with a marked respect.

The next morning the entire crew turned out of their bunks before dawn. A big cavvy of horses was driven off into the hills, followed by a well-stocked hoodlum- and chuck-wagon. With winter coming on rapidly and the imminence of heavy snow-storms Ed Graham did not want to run the risk of having any of his beef trapped in the higher mountain passes.

He put twenty men to combing the brakes and canyons of his Lury Hills range. It was rough, tiring work with a bitter wind whipping against the punchers' faces, turning their cheeks raw and red.

Blue Hawk rode with that crew and he took the steepest slopes, the most treacherous ravines on his trained cow-pony. Wild-eyed steers were choused out of their hiding places, sent careening down to a temporary holding ground.

A brief pause was made at noon for some hot chuck and coffee liberally laced with whisky. Then, switching saddles to fresh horses, the crew rode out again.

For two days they canvassed the Lury Hills. By mid-afternoon of the second day they had rounded up two hundred head and pushed them down into one of the lower meadows protected on three sides from wind and snow by a ring of rolling ridges.

Graham detailed three men to ride gun-guard on that beef and prepared to move his base camp into the Yellow Ridges after more strays. Blue Hawk and three other punchers were sent back to headquarters to see that everything was all right there and to bring out some spare horses. Several mounts had been lamed during the difficult hazing operations.

CHAPTER IX

Fugitive

FOR a long moment after Colonel Darwin's command to Wayne Morgan to turn around and head for the door a taut silence clamped down on the railroad office. The lamp on the rough-hewn table flickered, sending misshapen shadows streaking up and down the wall.

Morgan considered his chances here and found them poor. Uncertainty drew Jim Brown's brows into a heavy frown. Cold fury was in Darwin's eyes as they bored relentlessly into Morgan.

There was no mercy in the chief engineer, no compromise in the way the gun was gripped tightly in his fist. Morgan felt the man's hostility build up around him like an invisible wall. It tugged heavily at his heart, like a heavy weight.

From the street came the roars of the railroad men. There was no escape for him there. True, several hundred workers had seen Morgan's fight with Tracy and his partners and could vouch for his loyalty to Wyoming & Western. But for every paddy that had seen the fight there were five who had only heard of it second-hand, or had not heard of it at all.

When these men learned about Bannion, learned that Morgan was an im-

postor, all they would remember would be the wreck in Solo Canyon, their friends who had perished in the landslide. And in Morgan they would find someone on whom they could unleash their mass fury. A wrong word, a shout for revenge and the crowd would finish him.

These were Morgan's dismal thoughts. All the future he could see were a few precious moments. When those had gone death would be waiting for him.

"Start moving!" grated Darwin, waggling his gun.

Grim lines bracketed Morgan's mouth. He realized disaster was near when Darwin began crowding him into a corner. But it was in a moment such as this that Morgan's full courage and resourcefulness were released. And he was a man who would resist to the last breath, would never back down, no matter how staggering the odds.

He took off his hat, rubbed a muscular arm across his brow.

"Yuh're pushin' me kind of hard," he observed, fumbling with the hat-brim as Darwin took a threatening step toward him.

Suddenly Morgan threw the hat. It struck Darwin in the face. At the same instant the gun exploded. The twisting brim struck the barrel, slanted the shot upward. The bullet drove over Morgan's head, and Darwin never had a chance to fire again.

One great bound carried Wayne Morgan to Darwin. With lowered head and outflung arms, he came at the engineer. He butted Darwin under the chin, struck him with a looping right. Then his big hands fastened on Darwin, lifted him up and flung him against Brown.

Their bodies collided. Brown threshed wildly about to retain his balance. But Darwin's weight pulled him backward. They hit the edge of the table, carried it with them to the floor.

Morgan whirled, scooped up one of his guns and raced through the doorway. He went down the shaky outside steps three at a time. He struck the bottom as Darwin appeared on the upper level, shouting at the top of his lungs and firing.

The street was swarming with men. Attracted by Darwin's yells, they swung about, came on in a muttering wave. They threatened to block the head of the alley. In desperation Morgan swung back through the darkness. Behind him Darwin kept yelling and shooting.

"Get Wayne Morgan, you section hands! He's a killer!"

The crowd came on, rushing into the passageway in clumsy, lumbering confusion. Men fell and were trampled by their comrades in the headlong race after a man they could not even see in the thick shadows.

AT THE end of the alley, Morgan turned toward the depot. He had plunged on for two blocks when a horseman rode out of the gloom from between two buildings.

"Who's that?" came the taut query as the rider drew rein.

Morgan swerved, angling directly toward the man, with the sound of pursuit behind him like the beat of angry surf on a lonely beach. The rider jerked his horse about, his hand speeding toward a holstered gun.

The horse buck-jumped toward Morgan. Morgan stepped aside, threw himself against the animal's side. He flung a long arm upward, trapped the rider's left wrist and hauled him out of the saddle. There was no time for gentleness.

The man struck the ground with a jolting thud, started to scramble to his feet. Morgan drew his gun, chopped down with the barrel. As the man collapsed he vaulted into saddle and galloped toward the depot.

A scatter of shots ripped out behind him. But the lead went wild. As he reached the last houses of Silver Bow and galloped across the tracks, the headlight of a switch engine towing a string of steel cars picked him out. Morgan kicked the horse into a run, darted past the train and plunged on into the darkness.

He kept going up a steady grade that carried him into timber half a mile from town. A few mounted men stormed out of Silver Bow, speeding across the railroad yards, spreading out toward the hills. But none came in Wayne Morgan's direction.

Pulling up in a grove of trees, he watched the small army of spikers, graders and track-layers pour into the yards and through the depot, searching for him.

But after fifteen minutes the fever of

the chase subsided and they began to straggle back to the saloons. Morgan grinned, though there was no humor in being on the dodge.

He thought of Blue Hawk then, swung the horse about and struck off through the thinning timber, angling for a trail that would take him to their hide-out. When he did not find the Yaqui there he concluded that Blue Hawk must have landed a job with the Flying G.

Turning his commandeered horse loose, to find its way home, he saddled up the hammerhead roan and rode off toward the Flying G.

Before long he drew to a halt in some brush behind the bunkhouse. The main house was shrouded in darkness, but there was a light in the bunkhouse.

Morgan dismounted and gave the call of a mountain lion, a signal he and Blue Hawk used to summon each other. After a ten-minute wait a shape emerged from the yard shadows and came toward the trees.

"Senor?"

"Yeah, Hawk. Come ahead."

The Yaqui approached silently and swiftly.

"I ran into some trouble tonight," Morgan told him. "I had to clear out." Briefly he explained what had occurred. "Don't know how I'll stand with Brown and the paddies even after they hear what happened at end of track between Tracy and me. I'm still pretty much in the dark about the man behind the trouble. But I'm shore Brader has his iron somewhere in the fire. I mean to watch him. How about you, Hawk? What's new?"

"Graham has been movin' all his cattle into the lower meadows in the event a blizzard hits the country. He's puttin' heavy guards around them, too."

"Let me know if he plans any move against the railroad," Morgan said. "Though I've a feeling that Wayne Morgan has outlived his usefulness. From now on the Masked Rider will have to take over."

Lingering only long enough for Blue Hawk to sneak off to the kitchen and bring him some dried jerky and stale biscuits, Wayne Morgan remounted and rode off. . . .

WAYNE MORGAN, all next day, kept to the stiff edges of the hills which overlooked the yellow-brown slash in the earth which was the railroad's right of way.

With the steel pushing farther and farther from Silver Bow, most of the buildings there were being moved to the new town of Beaver Wells.

For more than an hour in the early afternoon Morgan looked down on Silver Bow from a brush-covered ridge. He heard the dim beat of saw and axe and hammer, the far-off crash of building walls collapsing.

Tents were stripped down and loaded into high-wheeled freighters, along with barrels, counters, store and saloon fixtures.

When he moved up the line he saw Callahan's eager track crew throw steel across the new trestle, then attack the gentle grade on the opposite side of Harlow Creek, swarming swiftly toward Beaver Wells.

Darkness brought Morgan back to Silver Bow. He was impatient to be getting to the bottom of the problem that was nagging him, but for some reason he could not explain why that same feeling of uneasiness assailed him persistently. He considered the string of "accidents" which had befallen Wyoming & Western, and he was well assured that whoever sought the railroad's destruction would not stop now. Other, and even worse trouble could be expected.

And that trouble might take any shape or form.

It was this restlessness, this insistent sense of things going wrong which sent Morgan into a patch of brush near the outskirts of town. He left the hammerhead roan in an empty barn whose weather-worn lumber had no doubt been considered too far gone for salvage purposes, a building which was too ramshackle for ordinary use.

Then, with a two-days' growth of beard concealing his somber bronzed face, and with his hat pulled low over his eyes, he mingled with the crowd. Only half the usual mob of construction workers roamed the streets. Many of them already had trekked on to Beaver Wells where, Morgan guessed, new saloons were attracting trade.

Walking along the wind-driven street where ruts were from four to six inches deep, Morgan was thinking that in just

a little while now this boom town would be nothing but a bare burned-out spot in the wilderness. Only a few rubbish heaps, an occasional tent stake or ramshackle barn would be left to show that there had ever been a town here.

ALREADY there were great dark gaps where canvas and wooden shacks had stood.

Yet so far Silver Bow still held tenaciously to its claim for existence. The Empire still drew hundreds of paddies to its bar and gaming tables. Inside, the band set up a noisy racket and the three-card monte dealer could be heard calling for bets.

Morgan walked past the wide V-opening of the saloon, was momentarily caught in the bright flare of yellow light gushing out into the darkness. He saw a vivid swirl of color on the dance floor where percentage girls danced with grinning, bearded men.

He was about to enter another honky-tonk several doors away when the sight of five men pushing through the torn flaps of the tent saloon halted him in the middle of the street. A wide-shouldered spiker, striding along with his head down, hands thrust deeply in his pockets, crashed into Morgan and swore savagely.

Morgan didn't even notice the collision or hear the man's angry cursing. He was staring through narrowed eyes at Bill Tracy who led the four gun-hung men.

There was purpose in their manner, a wary watchfulness in their eyes.

Morgan's right hand dropped nearer his belt. He moved on slowly, primed for a break as he saw the men look toward him. But their scrutiny was too swift for recognition. Morgan saw that Tracy's face was battered and bruised and his nose was covered with a huge bandage.

The five men swung down an alley. Some warning instinct sent Morgan stalking after them. He followed them to another alley which ran alongside the Empire.

He dropped flat in the dirt when they paused at the head of the alley to scan their back trail.

When they had ducked out of sight he rose and ran lightly forward, loosening both guns.

CHAPTER X

Night Raid

THERE was no sign of Morgan's quarry when he turned into the alley. He paced cautiously through the gloom, the pupils of his eyes dilating as he peered through the shadows. When he saw the door on the side of the building he realized it must lead directly to Jess Brader's private office. Here was an ideal means for Brader to contact his special friends without his regular saloon trade knowing anything about it.

Grimly Morgan slid up to the door, laid his ear against the panel. He could hear the subdued murmur of voices, but could not distinguish words. He stayed there until his body was stiff and his legs cramped. At last, he heard the scrape of chairs, the thud of boots coming toward the passage.

Flattening himself against the building wall, he waited for the men to emerge. There was no time to run to the end of the alley, so if he were forced to shoot it out with five men there was no help for it. What worried him most was that if he had to die tonight he would never get to the bottom of the railroad's trouble.

The door opened. Pale light flushed the alley and was shut off when the door closed with a squeak of unoiled hinges. All five men were there and they stood in complete darkness. One was near enough for Morgan to touch, but he had his back to Morgan.

Finally, as they moved off toward the street, Morgan heard one man mutter with gloating satisfaction:

"If this works tonight the railroad shore will be in a jam."

"Yuh'd better not miss," another man growled. "You take care of yore end and we'll handle Graham."

Dismay clutched at Morgan's heart as he moved forward silently. He saw the men separate at the end of the alley. Three moved down toward the depot. What evil mission were they bent upon now?

For a moment uncertainty held him unmoving. He didn't know just what steps to take first, but what he did know

was that he had to do this job alone, had to decide which group must be followed. Finally, he chose to follow Tracy who had mentioned he was going to "handle" Ed Graham.

It sounded as if the Colorado Central gunman trouble shooters planned a raid on the Flying G. On Graham's beef herds, undoubtedly.

Morgan saw Tracy and the man with him head for a livery to get horses and he hurried through the crowd to where he had left the roan. He mounted, struck off beside a string of loaded material cars waiting for an engine and picked up Tracy and his companion several hundred yards ahead of him on the main trail that led to the Flying G.

Whatever Tracy's plan was, Morgan was certain the Colorado Central man would not stage a raid with just one aide. And his conjecture proved correct when a hail came out of the brush ahead of Tracy. Tracy answered and two dozen mounted men, all masked, swung into view.

Dark as the night was there were enough stars in the sky for Morgan's discerning eyes to see, by their faint glow, that most of these new riders sat their saddles awkwardly. They were all bulky men and their indistinct voices were rough.

Morgan guessed that they were railroad workers, either recruited from disgruntled membes of Wyoming & Western or brought from Colorado Central's track gangs.

"All set, Tracy?" one of the riders asked.

"Yeah. Graham's got a big herd of cattle strung out in one of his lower meadows. Got about a half dozen gunguards there. It'll be easy runnin' off that beef. Let's go!"

THE men whirled their mounts and stormed off up the trail. Morgan followed for a half mile, then cut off into a side trail through thick timber. Once out of earshot of the other riders he pushed the roan hard.

He had come to a swift, hard decision. It was too far and too late to ride to Flying G headquarters. Besides, from what Blue Hawk had told him, Graham and most of his crew would be up in the Yellow Ridges hazing more strays out of the brakes.

All Morgan could do was to stop off at the hide-out which lay in direct line with a short-cut route to the meadow and change to his Masked Rider regalia.

When he reached the camp, it was deserted. He quickly donned his mask, cloak and hat and saddled Midnight. Then with the powerful black stallion beneath him and eager for a run, he sped off through the night.

He rode like a grim, avenging figure of doom. His eyes were bright with the savage anticipation of battle, and his blood was fired as always when he rode for justice.

Those six gun-guards would be no match for the two dozen raiders who were due to attack them, and his own two guns might do little to even the odds. Yet nothing could have induced him to swerve from his course.

Fast as his ride was, he was still two miles from the holding grounds when the flat report of gunfire reached him. Dimly he heard the bawling of cattle amid sporadic volleys of gunfire.

The Masked Rider ducked lower over Midnight's magnificent, straining body. His face felt raw and cold and the sky was being blotted out by heavy clouds which presaged snow.

Then abruptly he was in the clearing and the dark, heaving bodies of cattle—hoofs pounding the earth in a horrible drum-roll of sound, horns clacking against horns—were rushing across the flats.

Gunfire bloomed all around him. He saw the flash of five guns over in one corner of the meadow where the cattle had been bedded down and knew that was where the Flying G punchers had taken their stand. One man was already down. Others would succumb, when the raiders rushed them.

One swift glance showed the Masked Rider there was no hope of saving the cattle. Already the raiders had detailed half a dozen men to string out along the flanks of the cows to hold them to some sort of uneven, wavering line. The rest of the raiders gathered in a tight knot.

Then a man yelled and the Masked Rider recognized the shrill, vindictive voice of Bill Tracy. The raiders plunged their mounts down the slope straight toward the shallow gully where the Flying G punchers had taken refuge.

At a hundred yards they opened up

with six-guns that filled the glade with a deafening thunder.

They had no warning of the approach of that coal-black stallion and his masked, grim-faced rider until he was almost on top of them. Then the rider nearest to the black-clad man saw that great dark shape looming toward him and lifted a high, frightened yell into the night.

"The Masked Rider! Look out!"

The words died in his throat. Twin scarlet splashes leaped from the Masked Rider's gun bores. They speared the outlaw, jerked him out of the saddle, flung him under the flailing hoofs of another horse crowding close behind him.

The Masked Rider came on relentlessly, his guns singing their songs of death. He emptied two more saddles with the deadly accuracy of his fire. So savage and reckless was his charge that he broke up the outlaw attack. The raiders split, circled about aimlessly, firing into the night.

Then three men converged upon him, their guns bucking and roaring. The Masked Rider spurred Midnight straight at them. He caught the vague white blur of a face in his sights, dropped hammer on a shot. Now there were only two men left to face him.

BULLETS were droning about him. Something fiery slid along the top of his left shoulder, temporarily numbing his left arm. It forced him to holster his left-hand gun.

The Flying G punchers were swarming up out of the arroyo, firing at the milling raiders. The night was suddenly a bedlam. A bulky shape rode toward him. The Masked Rider swung that way and at the final instant recognized Blue Hawk.

"Senor!" cried the Yaqui. "You have come in time."

With the words the Indian's Winchester roared. A raider who had been drawing a bead on the Masked Rider's back flung up his hands and pitched backward over his cantle.

On either side of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk men were yelling and shouting and dying. A riderless horse, stirrups flapping, bucked wildly past them. Then four horsemen rushed up out of the gloom, closing in on the black-clad man and the Indian.

Muzzle flame licked hungrily toward the Masked Rider. He felt the hot breath of a bullet going past his face. A horse crashed into Midnight, nearly unseating the Masked Rider. A swinging arm reached out of the darkness. A gun butt grazed the side of his head. Dizziness assailed him and blackness veiled his eyes.

But instinct and determination kept him going. He jerked Midnight to one side. His own gun came down in a savage arc, the steel barrel cracking against flesh and bone. One of the riders dropped. Swinging the gun barrel around in a blur of speed, the Masked Rider squeezed off a pointblank shot.

He felt the gun kick back against his wrist, saw the ruby wink of flame, heard the shrill death shriek of a raider. Then he was turning, seeing Blue Hawk club an outlaw out of the saddle with the butt of his rifle. Another rider came against him and the Yaqui lost his rifle. The Indian's hand streaked to the sash at his waist.

There was a flash of steel as a knife blade sank hilt-deep in the raider's chest. Suddenly, then, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were free and charging toward another knot of attackers.

His body jolting to the lunging stride of the stallion, the Masked Rider felt the strengthening lash of the wind, saw the night sky turn white with drifting snow. Flakes as big as quarters floated down in a thick smother, swiftly blanketing the meadow in a white mantle.

The rataplan of hoofs, followed by a ringing shout, swung the Masked Rider's attention to the north.

"Feed them raiders lead, you Flying G waddies. Help is on the way."

At the same moment that the Masked Rider identified that voice, Bill Tracy boomed a call through the night.

"Hey, Jim Brown! Graham's bringin' more men! We've got to hightail!"

Abruptly, the raiders went galloping toward the V-notch of a high-walled pass through which the Flying G cattle had been driven.

There was an exultant shout from the three surviving Flying G waddies still able to sit their saddles as Ed Graham stormed up at the head of eight punchers whose guns were blasting a ruddy path through the pall of snow.

All these men were dark, whirling specks in a heaving sea of white. There was a cutting edge to the wind. It howled in from the higher chimneys and peaks, whipped a stinging spray of flakes against unprotected faces.

THEY charged on recklessly, strung out in a wide line, thundering after the fleeing raiders. A big gap separated the two factions, but the Flying G men were slowly reducing the distance. In the lead rode the Masked Rider. Few horses could challenge Midnight when it came to a matter of speed or stamina and now the gallant black stallion showed his heels to the other mounts.

Once the fleecy white curtain lifted enough for the Masked Rider to line his sights on a bobbing black shape. He let go with a shot, saw a horseman sway in saddle, then fall forward across the horn. Then the snow closed in again, whirling in a thick wall before the ripping gale.

A gust of wind brushed aside the sweeping snow once more. In that brief interval the Masked Rider saw the last of the raiders gallop into the V-notch of the pass. Then he saw something else. Something that made him haul in on Midnight's reins.

Ruddy, trailing flames flickered in the alternate rushes of white and darkness, lingering oddly in their slow descent to the ground. He heard no bullets, no crash of guns, and instantly recognized the danger with which he and the Flying G riders were plunging.

"Back—all of yuh! Dynamite!"

CHAPTER XI

Fighting the Blizzard

HORSEMEN were bolting into view from the smother of snow behind the Masked Rider. They heard his yell, saw his warning gesture to halt. Then a dull booming exposion drifted down on the wind. It was followed by the rumble of falling rocks and shale, interspersed with other explosions.

Ed Graham halted his big gelding beside Midnight, for the moment not even noticing its rider.

"Blast their souls!" the cowman growled. "They've blocked up the pass."

He pushed his horse forward cautiously, the Masked Rider at his side. The thump and roar of rocks had ceased and the screaming wail of the wind drowned out all other sounds. Icy flakes pelted the Masked Rider's face. They plastered Graham's heavy brows and eyelashes.

When they halted their horses, ten feet in front of them a wall of freshly riven rock and shale barricaded the entrance to the canyon.

"Good-by cattle," mourned the bow-legged Harker. "It'll take two days to clear out that rubble."

Ed Graham was cursing violently as anger shook his enormous body.

"With the canyon blocked," he said grimly, "we'd have to make an eight-mile circle to get back to the trail. And this blasted snow will blot out any sign the raiders might leave." His voice lifted suddenly as he saw the black-clad man beside him, and his hand slapped to his holstered gun. "Where did you come from?" he demanded. "Yuh're the Masked Rider, ain't yuh?"

"He is the Masked Rider, Senor Graham," Blue Hawk shouted above the shrieking wind. "And if he hadn't arrived when he did all the other gunguards would have been wiped out! I saw him ride straight for the raiders as they prepared to slaughter us in the arroyo. He broke up their attack almost singlehanded."

Graham grunted. The loss of his cattle was a terrible blow to his pride and his pocketbook and he wasn't taking it easily.

"How about that, Harker?" he whipped at the bow-legged man.

"The Indian's tellin' it straight," declared Harker. "This Masked Rider is a wizard with guns. Couple times I thought he was goin' to be salivated, but he came through with spoutin' guns and emptied more saddles."

Graham sat stiffly in his saddle. He acknowledged his appreciation of the Masked Rider's daring, but avoided the masked man's keen glance.

"How many head lost?" he asked Harker.

"There were two hundred in the bunch and they're all gone."

"That'll cripple me!" Graham ex-

claimed. "Most of 'em were good blooded stock, too. I can thank the railroad for that!"

"Yuh're wrong, Graham," broke in the Masked Rider.

Graham's features tightened. The skin around his cheek-bones grew rigid. He blinked angrily through snow-lashed eyes.

"Like blazes I am!" he snapped. "I heard somebody yell Jim Brown's name as I was ridin' up with the rest of the crew. And Brown is Wyomin' and Western."

"I heard it, too," admitted the black-clad man, in a firm, unyielding tone. "That was Bill Tracy, and I'm willin' to bet that Jim Brown was in Silver Bow all durin' this raid. Tracy yelled his name, wantin' yuh to think the railroad was behind the attack."

"Listen to me, Masked Rider!" snapped Graham. "I'm plumb grateful for yore help, but my beef is gone and nobody'll ever convince me that Wyomin' and Western wasn't back of all this.

There's been lots of talk about financial difficulties. The stockholders are howlin' about waste. Mebbe the railroad figgers on smashin' me and the other ranchers in the hills and gobblin' up all the land so's they can make a fortune by cuttin' it up in sections and sellin' to the settlers who'll be follerin' the steel. At the same time, it'd be a quick and cheap way of gettin' beef to feed the construction gangs."

THE Masked Rider shook his head and briefly told of what he had witnessed in Silver Bow.

"So it wasn't the railroad," he concluded. "It was Jess Brader and Tracy's bunch."

"Mebbe Brader lent Brown some men to handle the raid tonight," growled Graham. "But until I find other proof I'm believin' what I've seen and heard." He turned away, spoke to the crew. "Let's drift back. We got work to do, gettin' the wounded back to headquarters before the blizzard buries the bodies in ten-foot drifts."

Slowly they swung their horses in snow that was already an inch deep and piling up steadily under the unceasing lash of the storm.

They came back to the meadow and

[*Turn page*]

You're sure in line for shaving joy
When you use Thin Gillettes, my boy!
These blades last long—four cost a dime—
You look well-groomed, save dough and time!
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THIN
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Gillette
4 for 10c
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

dismounted. Graham's first move was to go to three of the dead raiders and rip the masks off their faces.

"There you are, Masked Rider," he grunted savagely, pointing to two of the men. "Them gents are gandy-dancers. I've seen 'em in town."

The Masked Rider's lips grew grim and his eyes glowed vengeful fire as he, too, recognized the men. All three of them had been at end of track the day he had beaten up Tracy. And all three had been among the disgruntled half score of workers who had quit and gone back on the empty material train with Tracy.

But the Masked Rider could not reveal this information directly, for it would establish a connection between Wayne Morgan and himself. Still he gave the best possible explanation under the circumstances.

"They're probably part of the bunch that quit Callahan's track gang when the new trouble shooter beat up Bill Tracy for tryin' to make the crew strike." He broke off abruptly. "Let's forget it and tend to the work waitin' for us here."

"I don't need yore help," Graham said gruffly.

"Don't be a fool. Yuh can use every hand now. I was up in the Yellow Ridges this mornin', saw yore punchers hazin' cows out of the brakes. Yuh'll have to drive the critters down to yore ranch before this blizzard traps 'em."

"Reckon yuh're right, at that," said the cowman. "If this blizzard keeps up for a day it'll block all the high passes."

The Masked Rider, Blue Hawk and the other Flying G punchers pitched in then, making temporary repairs on the wounded waddies. Of the five who had been with Blue Hawk originally, two were dead. The others were wounded, but able to ride.

Although the raiders deserved to be allowed to lie where they had fallen, the unwritten code of the land dictated that their bodies be rolled into a deep culvert and covered with rocks. Two wounded raiders were tied to their horses. Then the party set off through the whirling storm, headed for Flying G headquarters.

It was a long hour's ride through a night that had turned to a howling fury. Saddle leather squealed and creaked and the face of every man was plastered with snow, bitten raw by the lashing wind. They rode with heads bowed under trees straining under a weight of soft, clinging flakes that showered down upon them with each gust of wind.

They were stiff with cold and barely able to move when they reached the main buildings and piled down. Graham routed the cook out of bed. A huge pot of coffee was placed on the stove and a hot meal put out. The coffee, liberally laced with whisky, warmed the men, stirred their blood to circulating normally.

The wounded men were put to bed in the main house, their bullet hurts washed and bandaged. The Masked Rider wanted to ride off to Silver Bow for a doctor but Graham prevailed upon him to stay and get a little sleep. The wounded were resting comfortably and none of the men were in danger of passing out. Besides, there was a distinct risk in traveling that country alone at night in the midst of a blizzard.

The Masked Rider discovered his own wound was nothing more than a shallow groove across his shoulder which did not even warrant bandaging after it had been cleansed.

SHORTLY after dawn Ed Graham rounded up his crew and prepared to ride to the Yellow Ridges to help his hazers drive the cattle down from the hills before the blizzard trapped them in the mountains. Blue Hawk was detailed to go along, but the Masked Rider found time to instruct the Yaqui to contact him at once if Graham planned any move against Wyoming & Western.

A threat of constant worry trailed through the Masked Rider's mind. He could not easily forget the scene in Silver Bow the night before when he had made his choice of which group of toughs to follow. And now he wondered what deviltry had been planned by the three man who had gone off toward the depot.

The black-clad man was certain their mission was an evil one. And he was equally certain, from scraps of talk he had overheard, that the move had been directed against the railroad.

Had the toughs engineered another wreck? Or were they intent on stirring

up more discontent among the construction crews? The Masked Rider could find no answer to his own questions, but he knew he would know no peace until he had ridden to Silver Bow to find out what, if anything, had occurred.

Seated on Midnight, his muscular hands gripping the reins, and his head bowed against the constant sweep of wind and snow, he swung toward Graham, carefully watching him.

"Promise me one thing, Graham," he urged. "Give me yore word yuh'll make no move against the railroad until I can round up shore proof of my claim that Wyomin' and Western ain't been raidin' yore cattle."

"I make no promises," retorted Graham. His seamed features were harsh, his air intolerant. "And I'll handle things in my own time and my own way."

With that grim answer the cattleman signaled to his riders and they pounded out of the yard. Blue Hawk turned in the saddle once to nod significantly to the Masked Rider, showing by that gesture that he would keep in touch with the black-clad man.

Then the Masked Rider sent Midnight surging forward, pointing him toward the trail that would take him to Silver Bow. Once out of the yard he found himself bucking drifts in which the stallion plunged chest-deep.

It was slow, laborious work. Several times Midnight floundered on slippery rocks and into slippery depressions hidden beneath that widening white blanket.

A frigid north wind howled through the trees and the snow-laden branches dropped a steady shower of flakes upon horse and rider as they ploughed through the timber. The Masked Rider was one dark animate object in an endless sea of white.

Except for the creak of saddle leather and the wail of the wind a vast silence pervaded this rugged land. The cold reached through the Masked Rider's heavy coat and probed at his vitals with ice-rimmed greedy fingers. Wet snow clung to his eyes and face. It drifted inside his collar and froze there.

The sky was a mealy expanse of gray, and the distant tangle of bluffs and chimneys were lost in a fog of down-drifting snow that shut them from his view as if a thick, milky curtain had dropped in front of him.

CHAPTER XII

Trapped by Fire

MIGHTY as Midnight was, the stallion was laboring from his efforts when the indistinct bulk of warehouses beside the depot in Silver Bow showed up through the smother of snow.

The Masked Rider circled around the great dumps of ties and rails, ducking behind a string of empties on a siding and halted to study the change that had come over the boom town. The street was a mass of darkly churned snow that ran between rising walls of white. Here and there an alley cut through the drifts and led to some tent or frame shack that was still standing.

The Empire remained. The Masked Rider had heard in Beaver Wells that Brader was leaving the Empire because he was constructing a more elaborate dance hall and saloon in the new boom town.

Instead of the surging, turbulent thousands that had once roamed Silver Bow's streets and alleys, now only a few hundred paddies were left. About two hundred were swarming back and forth in the railroad yards, loading up material trains, attacking the dumps of ties, rails and spikes.

Wyoming & Western was making a desperate attempt to move all equipment and rolling stock ahead to end of track and out of the long cut through the hills to Harlow Creek before the blizzard covered the tracks in twenty or thirty-foot drifts, bottling up supply trains.

A single locomotive with a snow-plow attached went clattering up the line, snow spraying out on both sides of the engine cab. But the Masked Rider's attention was jerked abruptly away from that scene by a prolonged roar of sound in front of the railroad office.

A hundred brawny construction workers milled about, shouting and yelling. then big Pat Callahan shouted down the crowd.

"The cowmen have Colonel Darwin!" Callahan boomed. "Jim Brown just told me. I say we go after the colonel and wipe out Graham and his farmers for good! We'll teach 'em not to meddle with the railroad. Grab yore crowbars and mauls, buckos, and round up every

horse and mule ye can find! We'll meet at the depot."

Shock brought the Masked Rider up sharp. Darwin kidnaped! It couldn't be possible! But again the black-clad man remembered those three toughs who had gone toward the depot. They had been on their way to waylay Darwin!

Graham wasn't behind it. The Masked Rider was sure of that. Why had the division superintendent told the paddies Graham was responsible? The masked man knew he must see Brown and find out.

Somehow the Masked Rider was certain that Brader had had a hand in Darwin's disappearance. He had to convince Brown of that and stop the paddies from going out after revenge. If the cowmen and railroaders met there would be slaughter, not to mention the toll in laborers—most of them poor riders—who would get lost in the high drifts or be thrown from bucking mounts and doomed to a slow, freezing death in the storm.

Detouring in a wide circle around the town, the Masked Rider came up behind the railroad office and left Midnight in the lee of another ramshackle barn. He went up the rickety stairs and, with both guns jutting from his fists, kicked the door open and leaped inside.

CALLAHAN had returned and was talking to Jim Brown whose eyes were bloodshot and whose leathery face was drawn with strain. Both men whirled at his entrance.

"Hold it!" cautioned the Masked Rider. "I come as a friend. I just heard about Darwin. Is it true he's been kidnaped?"

"Where have you been?" demanded Brown. "I figgered I'd be seein' or hearin' of yuh—"

"Never mind that. Answer me."

"Yeah, he's gone," snapped Brown, his mouth a grim, thin slash in his weathered face. "Since early last night. Didn't want to say anything until I was shore he was in trouble. Graham's waddies kidnaped him."

The Masked Rider's eyes were bright and sharp behind his mask.

"How do yuh know?"

"I was out scourin' the town about an hour ago. When I got back I found this note." He handed it to the Masked Rider. "It's a ransom note and Graham's name is signed to it. They're askin' fifty thousand dollars for his safe return which is also supposed to be an idemnity for the cattle he claims the railroad stole from him.

"The low-down skunk knows we can't afford to lose Darwin. He's the guiding force behind Wyoming and Western. If anythin' happens to Darwin the road'll collapse and our investors'll back out. I aim to get Darwin back if I have to destroy the Flying G!"

Brown's rage was terrible. It mottled his cheeks with purple, and his big hands kept knotting into huge fists.

"It's a trick," said the Masked Rider. "Graham had nothin' to do with that, and I can prove it."

"How?" snapped Brown, swift interest lighting up his eyes. Then the light died out, and the corners of his mouth turned downward skeptically.

"I was with the Flying G all last night and this mornin'," declared the masked man. "They haven't got Darwin. I can swear to that. Graham has been too busy fightin' a bunch of masked raiders who stole two hundred head of cattle, to kidnap anybody. Tracy led the raiders. The whole thing was worked to make Graham think the railroad was responsible. Graham thinks so, because in the midst of it Tracy bawled out yore name, Brown, to hightail. And this kidnapin' is another deliberate trick to get the railroaders and cattlemen warrin' against each other, delayin' construction. I tell yuh Brader and Colorado Central are behind all yore trouble!"

In clipped words and as briefly as possible, the Masked Rider recounted to Brown all that happened. The division superintendent looked bewildered. A harried expression twisted his face and he bit his lips in indecision.

"I can't hardly believe it," he murmured. "But I ain't got any reason to think yuh're lyin'. Yuh helped the railroad at Solo Canyon and everything I've ever heard about yuh makes me think yuh're a square shooter, even if some folks do call yuh an outlaw. I reckon it could be Brader and that Colorado Central crowd. I made a mistake in not bustin' Brader from the start before he got so strong and lined up all the toughs on his side."

He paused and looked closely at the

Masked Rider.

"Yuh've been in hidin' since that wreck," he said. "Why?"

"Not hidin'." The Masked Rider shook his head. "Just gettin' information here and there to find out what's behind the railroad's trouble. I—er—owe a lot of my information to Wayne Morgan."

"Morgan!" exclaimed Brown. "I've been lookin' for him."

"Wyomin' and Western gave him a raw deal, Brown."

BROWN nodded dismally. What had happened to Morgan was an unpleasant memory to him.

"I know that," he confessed. "Colonel Darwin was dead set against him, though. We'd found out he had put his own name on the letter Darwin had written for the trouble shooter who has killed in the wreck. It looked suspicious. But when we learned about what he did at end of track when he broke up the strike, I was shore he was on the level, and just wanted the job—like he said. But where is he?"

"By this time he's well on the way to Frisco. He was pretty much disgusted. I'd met him once before, several years ago, in Texas. A lone wolf and plenty tough, but square. Ran across him by accident in the hills above the Flying G spread. Seems we was both huntin' evidence. Only he didn't like the deal that had been handed to him, and said he'd just about decided to take an offer to help patrol the right of way for a new railroad buildin' along the California coast."

The Masked Rider broke off as the sound of hundreds of men shouting and yelling at the depot came on the wings of the wind. It beat against the frail walls of the office like hammer strokes.

"Brown," the masked man said grimly, "yuh've got to stop them paddies from ridin' to the Flying G! It'll be a bloody carnage. Besides, half of yore fellers can't ride and they'll be thrown shore as shootin'."

"All right. But what about Darwin?" asked Brown. "If Brader's got him, where do yuh think he is?"

The Masked Rider considered a brief moment.

"We'll try the Empire. If he's not there we'll have to look for him in Beaver Wells. I figger they'll hang on to him until they get the money then kill him because that'll hurt the railroad more'n any wreck or strike could hurt it."

"Come on!" shouted Brown and leaped to a peg on the wall where a gun and cartridge belt hung.

He strapped it around his heavy coat. All three men went rushing out into the storm. At the foot of the stairway, one look toward the depot told them they were too late. Fully a hundred men mounted on mules and horses had gone off into the timber, intent on wreaking revenge on the Flying G.

Callahan groaned.

"We'll foller 'em later," said the Masked Rider. "Let's head for the Empire."

A crackling roar and a mushrooming pall of black smoke greeted them as they raced toward Brader's dance hall. The Empire was ablaze. Fire was licking along the walls from several places at once.

As the Masked Rider, Brown and Callahan went floundering through the knee-deep snow, suddenly four heavily bundled figures lurched out of an alley beside the Empire. When they sighted the oncoming men guns snapped into their hands and ruddy muzzle flares began to stab through the murk.

The Masked Rider spotted Bill Tracy at the head of the group. The black-clad man's guns swept up and red flames spurted from the long barrels. Tracy kept running, but his legs were pumping ineffectively against his weakening muscles.

The spread fingers of his left hand went to his side and a trickle of crimson seeped through. He fell on his face and a strangling cough racked his lungs. The bearded man behind Tracy vaulted the prone body of the Colorado Central trouble shooter and ripped two quick shots at the Masked Rider.

THE black-clad man was weaving and dodging, his muscular body held in a crouch, the guns in his fists spitting viciously. Two of his bullets sped for the man's chest. The bearded fellow twisted and spun into a hip-high drift.

Callahan grunted with pain as he stopped a bullet, but he plunged on. As the furious fight went on the Masked Rider noted vaguely that Brown and Callahan were still beside him, then he

saw that all Tracy's gunmen were down, their blood staining the snow.

"Yuh goin' inside that furnace?" demanded Brown breathlessly.

"Yeah," said the Masked Rider. "I've got an idea Darwin's in there. That's why they set the place on fire!"

Through the white spray of snow billowed great, surging flowers of flame. Heat struck at them solidly as they reached the saloon entrance and the hungry roar of the blaze was a challenging sound.

But the Masked Rider did not hesitate. Lowering his head and shielding his eyes, he bolted through the V-shaped opening of the clapboard saloon. Callahan and Brown followed at his heels.

It was like stepping inside a blast furnace. The fire was devouring the dry, frail wood in a relentless fury. Great runnels of scarlet flame rippled along the splintering boards. Cinders and smoke starred the eerie, crimson-dappled interior.

Through heat-seared eyes they stared about the room, at the fire eating into the bar, leaping to the gaming tables. Boards splintered and cracked and a cloud of flying sparks speared past them.

Coughing and gasping for breath, the Masked Rider lurched to Jess Brader's office. He kicked the door open, pushed inside, with Brown and Callahan behind him.

The room was empty, and already this new draft was setting up a terrific roaring behind them. Smoke, dark and thick and acrid, swirled around them, wrapping greedy fingers around Brader's desk and chair.

The Masked Rider stumbled over a rug. The rug shifted, revealed a rectangular cut-out pattern in the floor. In the middle of that rectangle was a metal ring.

"A trap-door!" he exclaimed.

"Darwin's down there!" Brown yelled.

The Masked Rider grabbed the ring and hauled up the trap-door. The weird light of the mounting blaze behind them lit up gloomy depths. It showed a slanting stairway, a shallow room and a man bound and gagged, lying on a dirty blanket.

The man was Colonel Darwin. Brown and the Masked Rider leaped into the black hole. Fingers fumbling awkwardly in their haste, they freed Darwin's bonds, ripped the gag from his mouth.

Darwin mumbled something, and his squinting eyes fixed worriedly on the masked man.

"Yeah, he's the Masked Rider," Brown said hastily. "But if it hadn't been for him we wouldn't be here, and this'd be yore funeral pyre."

"Hurry!" the Masked Rider choked, his breath coming laboriously. "Got to get him out of here pronto!"

CHAPTER XIII

Wrecked Trestle

COLONEL DARWIN was stiff and weak from being tied up so long. They had to carry him up those steep, slanting stairs. Near the top, Callahan lent a hand. Then, with Callahan bringing up the rear, the masked man and Brown staggered with their burden across the long room which had become a torrid furnace.

Somehow they gained the street. The swift bite of the gale, the savage lashing of the icy snow on their faces, was a welcome relief. They laid Darwin down.

A fit of coughing seized the Masked Rider, then, as he stared back at the Empire, cold horror hit him.

"Where's Callahan?" he demanded.

"I—I don't know!" Brown stared wildly at the burning piece. "I thought he was right behind us."

Fearfully both men's eyes were on the billowing black smoke starred with curling tendrils of flame. Callahan was somewhere inside, at the mercy of the blaze!

"He must have been downed by smoke!" yelled the Masked Rider, as he ran for the saloon.

"Wait!" yelled Brown. "Yuh can't go in there! It's suicide!"

But the Masked Rider didn't hear him. A crimson banner whirled past the V-notch of the saloon entrance, taunting him, daring him to brave its menace. Then a rush of wind whipped that tongue of flame backward. The Masked

Rider saw his chance and dived through the opening.

He stumbled over a loosened board, sprawled on his face. His groping fingers scraped along the floor. A splinter raked his palm and heat swept against him. Charred boards were breaking up, dissolving into ashes. A section of the back wall caved in with a mighty *whoosh* of sound. A burning brand fell on his arm, singeing a wide patch of hair. He flung it away and got up, staggering farther on into the depths of that roaring red peril.

There was a booming concussion as a heavy timber plunged to the floor somewhere beyond him. Then he saw Callahan lying on his face. He was trapped beneath a heavy post which had collapsed, pinning him against the wall of Brader's office.

The black-clad man crawled to the spot. Callahan was moaning, but he managed to grin as the Masked Rider got a grip on the timber, tried to lift it. It didn't budge. The smoke was getting thicker. It was like an acrid black fog, swathing him in its choking mists.

At last the timber began to move. Callahan shifted, his legs sliding along the floor. He tried to crawl away. The timber was ablaze at its far end and flames were feeding along it, seeping toward them.

There was a sudden crash above them. Daylight showed through the roof. Crimson-starred brands sprayed down upon them and were followed by a tangle of falling timbers. A split two-by-four cracked the Masked Rider behind the knees, knocking him on his face. Another timber tumbled down in a shower of spars. It glanced off his shoulder, thumped against the side of his head, ramming his chin into the hot floor boards.

Blackness swirled over his consciousness. Grimly, desperately, he fought it. There was a dull roaring in his ears. His smoke-seared eyes could see nothing but a leaping sea of fire. He strained and twisted, trying to free himself of the tremendous weight which crushed him to the floor, but could not move it.

He was trapped! He knew that when the timbers above him did not move. The weight pressed painfully and steadily into his back. His palms were spread out before him. Fascinated with horror, he watched rivers of fire race toward him along the floor. Boards were sucked up by the blaze and the flames marched on.

IT BECAME hard for him to breathe, for the heat was a dry, searing torture, racking his lungs. Clouds of smoke, lit up with pulsing tongues of red, enveloped him. Death was seeking him out with a hot, insistent hand.

Then out of the blinding nightmare shot through with taunting spurts of flame, hideous sprays of sparks, falling brands, waves of choking black smoke, came a steady, urgent call.

The Masked Rider hadn't realized that he had been drifting off into the deep, dark pit of oblivion. Awareness returned to him in slow, agonizing waves. Awareness that brought a renewal of pain and hopelessness. But there was the call again!

"Senor! Senor!"

Then he saw Blue Hawk. It brought no wonder to him that the Yaqui was here. It was enough that Blue Hawk was beside him, crouching in the sweeping rush of flames and smoke. Strength and hope returned. The Masked Rider began to renew his struggles to get free. Dimly he saw another broad-shouldered shape, outlined by the red of flames, and recognized Brown. And he caught a glimpse of Callahan, also pinned down and helpless.

Now Blue Hawk and Brown tugged at the timbers which imprisoned him and Callahan. One came loose and was tossed aside. Then another was lifted away. Strong arms gripped the Masked Rider under the arm-pits, hauled him to his feet.

"All right, Hawk," he said huskily.

He lurched unsteadily, but he was able to stand. The Yaqui watched him until satisfied he would not fall, then helped free Callahan. The railroad foreman had a broken leg and had to be carried. And as all of them fought their way across the blazing room, to the Masked Rider it seemed that the saloon entrance was barred by a high red wall that was alive and evil, standing there to hold them back.

The saloon was little more than a hollow shell now. All the walls would collapse at any moment. The entire floor was burning. Flames licked at their

clothing. But somehow they fought their way to the entrance, and in one brief moment when a gust of wind whipped a narrow clear passage through that barrier of fire, they plunged through.

Out into the blizzard they staggered on into the cold drifts. The flames on their clothing hissed out. They rolled in the snow, reveling in the cold.

Construction workers had come rushing up to watch the destruction of the building, not knowing that men inside it were fighting for their lives. Now they lent helping hands. Someone produced whisky and it was passed around. After ten minutes the Masked Rider could stand without swaying.

He had no broken bones, but his back ached from the pressure of the two-by-four and his eyes were blood-shot from smoke. He glanced at Blue Hawk, and in that one look were his fervent thanks, gratitude that did not need to be put into words.

"Where did you come from, Hawk?" he asked.

"Senor, we've got to hurry!" urged Blue Hawk. "Graham has sent a crew up to Harlow Creek to dynamite the trestle!"

That announcement brought an infuriated shout from Colonel Darwin.

"That's what Brader's bunch are plannin' to do!" he exclaimed, and as he shot a glance at the Masked Rider there was admiration and respect in it. "They're out in the open now. Brader is takin' orders from John Winston of Colorado Central. I heard all the deviltry they were plannin', for they never intended to let me live. Just until they got the ransom money. Masked Rider, when you helped bust up that raid at the Flying G last night, even though they nabbed Graham's cattle, they got scared. They were afraid you were gettin' on to their game. So they figgered on burnin' down the Empire with me in it so there'd be no evidence to convict them of having had any part in my disappearance. With me gone they counted on Wyoming & Western goin' busted."

"As it would!" growled Brown.

THE Masked Rider moved over to Bill Tracy who was being forced to stand by three grim-eyed paddies. Tracy was weak, for he had lost considerable blood. There was abject fear in his eyes.

"Tracy, yuh're goin' to spill all yuh know and back up everythin' Darwin has said here," the Masked Rider grimly announced. "I figgered you and Brader was workin' for Colorado Central to bust Wyoming and Western. You and yore toughs caused those supply train wrecks and raided Graham's beef. Right?"

"Yeah, yeah!" gasped Tracy feebly. "But don't let these paddies get me!"

"Yuh should have thought of that before yuh dynamited Solo Canyon and killed them gandy-dancers," snapped the Masked Rider, cold steel in his eyes and in his voice. He swung on Darwin and Brown. "We've got to move. If it ain't too late we've got to head off the paddies before they tangle with Graham's punchers."

"And we've got to stop his punchers from blowin' up the trestle!" Brown said grimly.

"Yuh'll never have a chance," broke in Tracy. "Brader's toughs are already up at Harlow Creek, settin' a charge. Yuh'll be too late."

Brown cursed, moved toward Tracy as if he meant to strangle the remaining strength out of him. Colonel Darwin looked haggard and beaten.

"We'll do what we can," declared the Masked Rider, and the very tone of his voice, his personality, seemed to give these men some hope. "I saw a couple of locomotives in the yard. Hook one up to some flats and a box-car. We'll load our horses in the box-car, let the paddies ride the flats and ride out to the trestle."

He swung his attention directly to Brown and Darwin.

"Brown, you go with the men, but Colonel Darwin, Blue Hawk and I can get off the train five miles west of Silver Bow. That'll put us somewheres between Flying G headquarters and the Yellow Ridges where Graham went early this mornin'. He should be hazin' his beef down through the lower meadows by this time. Meanwhile, the paddies can ride out to the trestle with Brown and stop that blast—if there's time."

Grimly the masked man recognized the tragedy that was facing these railroad men who had survived all the hard rigors of long months of hewing a path for the steel out of the wilderness. And now a blizzard and a dynamite blast

threatened new disaster.

With the Masked Rider leading them, the entire mob stumbled through the snow to the depot. Eager construction workers, wallowing in drifts, leaping over rails, swarmed through the yard. While Callahan was carried inside the boarding train and someone put a big pot of coffee on to boil, the track crew hooked up a train and a fireman began stoking a fire in the firebox to build up steam pressure.

Several cups of steaming coffee served to send warmth and renewed vigor through the Masked Rider's bone-weary body. Then he was out in the yards again, leading Midnight into a box-car.

Two hundred gandy-dancers leaped aboard the flats. A huge plow had been attached to the front of the engine and with a brawny Irishman at the throttle, the train clattered off the siding onto the main line and lurched up the grade toward Harlow Creek trestle.

It had stopped snowing now, but there was the threat of more snow in the drab, gray sky and in the raw edge of the gale.

The big plow hooked to the front of the engine bit into the drifts. Snow sprayed past the train in billowing clouds. Drive wheels spun on the icy rails and steam jetted from every pounding cylinder as the train labored up the grade.

FIVE miles out of Silver Bow the line of cars jolted to a halt. The Masked Rider, Blue Hawk and Colonel Darwin, took their horses, mounted, and set off through unmarred banks of snow, angling for a narrow trail that wandered through a thin stand of timber.

They kept their heads bowed while the wind wailed its frigid song around them. Half a mile they covered at a slow, laboring pace. Then they heard a distant shout, the faint bawling of cattle, the flat report of a gun.

Darwin flashed the Masked Rider a grim look. They pushed their mounts harder. As they broke suddenly out of the timber, ahead of them they caught a brief glimpse of a straggling line of cattle coming down through a cut in two brush-clad hills. Riders were deploying away from those cows, spurring toward another bunch of men galloping awkwardly toward them.

Abruptly a far-off, rumbling concussion of sound slammed its booming racket against the savage, clarion call of the wind. That duller roar ran on and on for ten or fifteen seconds before its echoes were absorbed by the blizzard.

"There goes the trestle!" grated Darwin.

"And there are the paddies and the ranch men," said the Masked Rider. "At least, we're in time to keep 'em from killin' each other."

CHAPTER XIV

Ride Through Peril

SHOUTS and yells broke from the awkwardly mounted gandy-dancers. The few who were armed with guns fired wildly, their bullets speeding harmlessly past the punchers.

"Tear them cowmen apart, buckos!" some spiker roared. "We'll clean up the woods with 'em and get Darwin back!"

Although so tremendously outnumbered, the grim-lipped Flying G waddies came plunging on. Their guns swept out and began to flash redly through the storm. Two spikers spilled from their mounts into a drift. Then, suddenly, knots of men were locked in fierce hand-to-hand encounter.

Into that seething tangle rode the Masked Rider and Wyoming & Western's chief engineer.

"Hold it, you paddies and cowmen!" bellowed the black-clad man. "There's no need to fight."

"Stand back, Masked Rider!" growled a brawny gauger. "We're findin' out where Darwin is and gettin' him back."

"Darwin is here with me!" yelled the Masked Rider.

Grimly he spurred Midnight right into a big tangle of wrestling shapes. The stallion's powerful shoulders knocked men to right and left. They floundered in the snow, cursing and growling. The masked avenger clubbed one man into submission with a blow from his Colt barrel.

Then several paddies were shouting: "It *is* the colonel, buckos!"

As suddenly as the battle had begun,

it halted. Punchers holstered their guns. Railroad workers dropped crowbars and mauls.

"I'm mighty glad we were in time," Darwin said fervently. "This might have been a slaughter." He looked at Ed Graham. "Graham, with the aid of the Masked Rider I was rescued from the Empire where I'd been taken by Brader's toughs and left to burn to death when they set the place on fire.

"They kidnaped me and left a note with Brown signed with your name. It was those toughs, working with John Winston of Colorado Central who caused the wrecks of our supply trains and who stole your beef."

Graham looked from Darwin to the Masked Rider, then to Bill Tracy who, pale, and rigid with cold, could barely sit his saddle. The bullet wound in his side and the grueling punishment of the ride had taken severe toll.

"Talk, Tracy," snapped the Masked Rider, "if yuh want to save yore miserable neck. Tell Graham it's all true."

"Darwin's right," Tracy blurted hoarsely. Abject terror twisted his thin face. "Brader and Winston are the men yuh want."

A swift change came over the big cowman's features, and his voice was troubled.

"If I'd only known in time!" he moaned. "We've all been fools. I sent a bunch of men up to the creek to blast the trestle. Yuh heard that blast a few minutes ago? That was the bridge goin'. Reckon it's too late to say I'm sorry as blazes—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of four riders, ploughing through the snow from a side trail. They approached warily, then came on more rapidly as Graham beckoned.

"Yuh dynamited the trestle?" Graham demanded drearily.

"No!" was the prompt angry reply. "Some jaspers beat us to it. We was late gettin' started and lost a lot of time when my hoss threw a shoe and went lame.

"It was just as we topped the first high ridge and saw the trestle that the bridge blew up. Thought we saw some men ride off on the far side of the creek, but we couldn't be shore."

"Brader's toughs blasted the bridge," said Tracy.

"THAT'LL delay us for days in this weather," Darwin said savagely. "Every supply train from Kansas City will be held up until the bridge gang can make repairs. What's more, we may be trapped this side of the divide if the snow doesn't let up."

"Wait!" said the Masked Rider eagerly, but none of them could guess how impatient he was to face Brader and Winston and finish this business which threatened to ruin Wyoming & Western. "Mebbe we can make temporary repairs and run a train to Beaver Wells and clean out every tough at end of track."

Roars of approval greeted that suggestion. Some of the defeated expression left Darwin's face. His eyes began to show hope.

"It's worth a chance," he said.

"And it's a chance for everybody to throw his fists and guns into a fight to clean the hardcases out of this area," added the Masked Rider grimly. "We've got more'n three hundred paddies here. If we go back to the tracks I figger Brown ought to be bringin' the special back this way. We can return to Silver Bow, load up with rails, ties and lumber and repair the trestle."

He paused to fling a deliberate, hard stare at Graham, and the punchers lined up behind him.

"How do you figger in this, Graham?" he demanded. "Yuh've lost plenty of beef to the toughs. Here's yore chance to square accounts. If yuh help the railroad now, yuh'll be helpin' yoreself in the long run."

"Masked Rider," replied Graham quickly, "I'm with yuh."

The huge cavalcade swung about then, and headed back toward the railroad cut. Graham paused only long enough to delegate a crew of five men to haze the beef herd back to the ranch. Then they were pushing through the timber, over a trail already broken by the Masked Rider and Colonel Darwin.

It began snowing again and the wind lifted, shouldering through the trees unceasingly, savagely. A smother of flakes swirled about them, completely blanketing this land. And in all the high passes and the deep railroad cuts the drifts grew deeper and deeper.

The piercing wail of the locomotive whistle came down the grade to them as they reached the right of way. In ten

minutes the flats swung into view around a bend, jolting over the rail sections.

Brake shoes squealed and the train halted. Jim Brown leaped out of the engine cab with the dire news that the trestle had been dynamited and that he hadn't arrived in time even to see any signs of the men who had been responsible.

"How bad is it?" the Masked Rider demanded.

Brown shook his head. His face was worried.

"Big section this side of the creek is ruined. Tracks ripped up, tossed into the gorge, and the superstructure messed up."

"Think the crew we have with us could repair it well enough to put a train across it before night?" the Masked Rider asked. "Don't forget we've got Bachelor and some of his bridge gang with us."

"I doubt it," Brown said dismally. "Especially in this storm."

"I still think it's worth a try," said the Masked Rider.

He looked at Darwin who nodded vigorously. Accordingly the black-clad man, Darwin, Blue Hawk and Tracy, led their horses to the box-car to go back with the train to Silver Bow with the paddies who piled into the flat-car. The rest agreed to wait in the bitter drive of the wind and snow for the train's return.

They backed down the westbound track at high speed, bell clanging loudly and the whistle echoing eerily through the canyons. In Silver Bow it took forty minutes to hook up a string of gondolas and additional flats. They loaded rails and ties and hundreds of feet of board lumber for the trestle.

THEN with the Masked Rider and a brawny Irishman alternately bailing coal into the fire-box to maintain a high steam pressure, Brown sent the train rocketing around curves, slamming ponderously up the grades to where Graham and the others waited.

They made just a brief stop to pick up the cowmen and the few laborers with them, then rolled on to the trestle. High on the windswept tableland, with the turbulent roar of the creek in the rocky gorge a thunder in their ears, they came to the scene of the wreck.

The Masked Rider's first view of it was disheartening. Torn and splintered timbers pointed in all directions. A section of rail hung over the gorge, twisted and bent in the shape of a horseshoe. There were great dark gaps in the spiderlike webbing of the wooden supports which extended tier on tier into the canyon.

Bachelor, foreman of the bridge gang, led the eager paddies from the train and attacked the seemingly hopeless task of repairing the span before darkness set in. First came the laborious job of unloading all the equipment and tools. But the hundreds of hands that labored unceasingly finished that chore rapidly.

Then workers began to swarm over the webbing with hammers and saws and nails. The snow drifted down in an ever-thickening curtain and the gorge was lost in a white haze. Hands grew stiff and numb with cold. The wind buffeted the workers, laced sharply through their heavy clothing, strove to loose them from their precarious holds on cross-pieces.

Inexperienced as they were, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk found themselves climbing through the interlaced webbing of broken, disjointed timbers. Great two-by-fours and other larger, stronger sections of boards were passed to the black-clad man. He helped set them in place. His arm drove up and down in an endless rhythm, punching spikes into place.

Once he lost his grip on a cross-piece and fell several feet, bumping and jolting against hard-edged boards. Finally his groping hands found a purchase on a strong two-by-four and he held on until Bachelor and another man came to his aid.

One hour, two hours, three hours passed. Still the storm raged. And the snow grew deeper in the canyon, piled higher along the tracks. The men labored on, racing against time, buoyed by the urgency of this job that had to be done and a grimmer job which lay ahead —one of revenge and retribution.

At last, the supporting sections of interlaced timbers had been sufficiently repaired to risk laying down new ties and bolting new rails into place. The paddies swarmed back to the canyon rim. Darwin and Brown and the Masked Rider surveyed the hasty repair job. In each

man's eyes could be seen the same gray doubt and the same reckless resolve to take the great risk of running a train across the gorge.

"All right, buckos," announced Darwin. "We'll take a chance. Any of you who don't want to tag along can stay back here."

Wide grins greeted his remark. Then every worker was racing toward the flats to find a place for himself. The Masked Rider, Blue Hawk, Darwin and Brown piled into the engine cab. Coal was heaped on the fire. Steam rose in the gauge. Brown grabbed the Johnson bar, sent the train backing down the line for almost a mile.

Then he looked once at the others, slammed on the brakes. His hand reached for the throttle, moved it forward. The train lurched. Couplings jolted thunderously. Ponderous drive wheels churned over the slippery rails.

The train gained speed rapidly. The rail clicks merged into a continuous rattle. Ruddy flame and smoke bloomed from the wide stack. The sound of the exhaust was a roaring sound that challenged the wild wailing of the wind.

CHAPTER XV

Finish Fight

EVERY face in the engine cab was grim and bleak, the same unanswerable question was throbbing through each mind. Would the trestle hold the train? Or would it collapse, sending engine, cars and men plummeting to destruction in the rocky abyss of Harrow Canyon?

The train crested the grade, shot across the flat rim and came on the bridge approach. Brown and the Masked Rider craned their heads out of the cab window, careless of the icy lash of wind. Their eyes were riveted upon the twin lines of steel that spanned the shaky, half-repaired spiderlike webbing of the trestle.

Brown's hand moved the throttle to the last notch. The train lurched forward, the steel plates on the boiler head creaking and groaning. Then they were out upon the trestle, high above the gorge.

The train was like a leaping steel monster bouncing over the shaky, uneven roadbed. The Masked Rider felt a sickening lurch of his stomach when the timbers beneath the locomotive sagged. Somewhere there was a slowly splintering crash of sound.

They were hitting close to fifty miles an hour as they sped across the trestle. Brown decided to keep the throttle full ahead and take the curve on the far side of the creek without throwing on the brakes.

They hit the bend, sped past bleak, bare ridges as the wheels screeched around the curve, trucks jolting and rattling. The Masked Rider peered backward. He saw the last of the flat cars, loaded with workers, bounce and careen over a sagging section of the bridge. Then he saw timbers buckle and sag, saw a section of rail rear skyward, split away from the adjoining rail and plunge into the canyon.

Other timbers split and broke, and fully one quarter of the bridge began to disintegrate. But that last flat stayed on the rails, was dragged around the bend! Then the train was racing on toward Beaver Wells.

"We made it!" the Masked Rider's grin was tight with the strain that had gripped him.

"It was close." The same strain was in Darwin's face and husky voice.

Big Jim Brown turned from the boiler head. His heavy shoulders straightened, and his jaw was belligerent.

"I'm lookin' forward to the fight ahead," he said.

"So am I." The Masked Rider immediately began checking his guns.

On and on they rolled through the storm, with the light fading rapidly from a dull gray sky. At last the dark blur of buildings that were Beaver Wells came into view. They thundered on. Brown closed the throttle, grabbed the air brake lever. Wheel brakes locked along the straining line of cars and the train jolted to a halt thirty feet from end of track.

With wild roars the paddies jumped from the cars, started rushing toward Main Street. Other workers milled back and forth in the snow that clogged the alleys. Some were turning toward the train, rushing foward to meet the new arrivals.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk climbed down from the cab. They saw a locomotive, steam billowing from exhaust valves on the eastbound track. There was no hogger in sight. But they gave it only a passing glance, then were running forward with the paddies.

In Main Street yelling of the gandy-dancers shook the air of the late afternoon. Ahead loomed the big wooden shack which was Brader's new saloon and dance hall. They swept on toward it, and in moments more, bedlam ruled in Beaver Wells.

WITH crowbars, picks and axes the paddies struck the Empire. A big bunch of them raced inside. Others began beating and hammering at the walls, tearing at the boards with crowbars and axes.

Saloon toughs mingled with the paddies. Hand-to-hand fighting went on inside and outside of the dance hall. Half a dozen gunmen stormed out of an alley, red flames spurting from their guns.

The Masked Rider knocked over a big, bearded man with a sweeping blow of his fist. Then he ducked into the alley and his flaming Colt dropped one gunman in his tracks, sent another skidding face-down in the snow.

Suddenly a door far down along the building was opened and two men rushed out. One was tall and slender, wearing a black hat and gambler's coat. The other man was paunchy and heavy. With a surge of anger the Masked Rider recognized Jess Brader and John Winston. He had left Blue Hawk and the other Wyoming & Western men in Main Street, fighting, but alone he went slogging through the snow after the dark, fleeing shapes in this back street.

They went past one intersection, then ducked into an alley. It was not until they came out into the open beyond town that they became conscious of pursuit. Brader, turning to glance back, saw the Masked Rider and fired three shots at his weaving target without any effect.

They were heading for the railroad tracks. Suddenly the Masked Rider realized why that locomotive had been waiting on the eastbound rails. Brader and Winston had been prepared for emergencies and meant to leave their hirelings to face the fury of the mob while they fled.

Brader and Winston reached end of track, climbed up into the engine cab. Breath was tearing at the black-clad man's lungs as he sought to increase his pace. His right foot plunged into an unseen hole and he fell into a drift. But he was up instantly, blowing through the snow that plastered his face and mask.

Steam was jetting from the engine's exhaust valves. The huge drivers began to rotate and the locomotive chuffed forward as the Masked Rider hit the edge of tracks. The engine was drawing away from him. His boots pounded over the ties.

Winston appeared above him, swaying in the shifting coal pile of the tender. A gun lifted in his fist. The Masked Rider dug in his heels and raced on. A bullet clanged off a rail beside him, then he reached out, got a hold on the railing of the steel ladder that led up the rear of the tender.

He pulled himself upward. Ties blurred dizzily beneath him as the locomotive gathered speed. The exhaust was a bellowing roar in his ears. Winston scrambled closer. A hunk of coal flew past the Masked Rider's face. It was followed by a blast of hot lead. Hanging to the railing, he drew his Colt, made Winston draw back with a flashing shot.

Holstering his gun, he clambered to the top of the tender, balancing his body to the swaying of the locomotive. The click of rail joints was a humming rattle in his ears as he came up with an unexpected rush, jumped into the piled coal.

His right foot went out from under him and he fell. Winston, his lips bared in a snarl, but with fear graying his flabby jowls, fired again—and missed. He was earing back the hammer for another shot when the Masked Rider struggled to his knees and drove a bullet into him.

Winston jerked. Horror turned him rigid. Then he lurched forward and as he fell his gun went off. A hot sliver of pain shot through the Masked Rider's left arm. Numbness crept along the muscles and blood began to seep out of a wound above the elbow.

HE DROPPED his left-hand gun, but promptly lifted his other Colt and pinned his sights on Winston who

was getting up again. The gun crashed. The bullet cut all support away from Winston's right leg and he plunged face-down in the coal.

The Masked Rider left him there and stumbled toward the engine cab. Jess Brader was at the throttle, driving for every bit of speed in the protesting high-wheeler. He spun around and saw the Masked Rider. A gun flicked into his hand.

The Masked Rider fired first, but his feet were already slipping out from under him in the treacherous mountain of coal. A wild bullet ricocheted off the boiler head.

Amid a dark shower of coal, the Masked Rider half-fell, half-leaped into the cab. Brader tried to twist aside, but the Masked Rider's full weight caught him, impelled him backward. Long arms wrapped around Brader, pinned him unmercifully as the two men crashed to the cab floor.

The shock of that fall drove the wind out of Brader. For a moment he lay still and the Masked Rider slugged him with his gun barrel.

A lurch of the locomotive rolled the Masked Rider to the side. Brader, wiry and still dangerous, scrambled around, kicked the masked avenger in the ribs. The Masked Rider's right arm swung, clubbing the gun, but his blow at Brader's head missed.

Another kick in the ribs, the smash of an arm against his wrist, made him drop his remaining gun. Then both were on their feet, slugging it out, fists hammering flesh and bone. The Masked Rider couldn't lift his left arm. But he drove in hard, hooked his right to the jaw, brought a savage uppercut to Brader's jaw that sent the gambler spinning against the boiler head.

A glazed look spread over Brader's face. In desperation he grabbed for a big iron wrench. But he never got a chance to wield it, for the Masked Rider charged him. A shoulder drove Brader's back against sharp-edged gauges, and a looping fist smashed home on the angle of his jaw under the ear and dropped him, unconscious, to the steel-plated underpinning.

Exhausted from his harrowing labors, while the pain in his left arm prodded him, the Masked Rider whirled to the cab window. The damaged Harlow Creek trestle was rushing up to meet him!

He dived toward the air brake. One swift move closed the throttle and shut off the steam. Then he threw on the brakes, fighting the momentum of the engine with air and sand from the boiler dome.

Skidding along the slippery rails, wheels spinning, then locking as the sand took hold, the high-wheeler finally slid to a halt forty feet short of the trestle.

Although the Masked Rider's fatigued body was crying for rest, he was anxious to return to Beaver Wells. Accordingly, he grabbed the Johnson bar and shoved the locomotive into reverse. . . .

When he got back to end of track there was a seething mob of men waiting for him. Right in front were Colonel Darwin, Jim Brown and Blue Hawk. Many, including Darwin himself, were bloody and disheveled from fighting, but triumph gleamed in their eyes.

The Masked Rider climbed wearily down from the engine cab, swaying a little when he struck the snow. Beyond the crowd the snow had been churned into a brownish mess by hundreds of sliding boots.

Brader's pretentious new saloon had been torn down. It was now just a tangle of boards and twisted joints, in the midst of which lay the ruins of a portable bar, a piano and fifty broken tables.

"Where did you go, Masked Rider?" demanded Darwin.

The black-clad man gestured to the tender and the cab.

"I spotted Brader and Winston tryin' to light a shuck out of Beaver Wells. I followed 'em and brought 'em back."

"Both of 'em?"

"Yeah."

DARWIN grinned. All the spikers and graders and track-layers were grinning. The love of a fight showed in their faces and the admiration for a man who was tough and hard and courageous like themselves bannered from their shining eyes.

"You're all man," murmured Darwin. "I'm glad you cornered Winston. Is he dead?" When the black-clad man shook his head, Darwin resumed. "Well, in that case I'll turn him over to the Gov-

ernment. We'll let President Grant handle him. I reckon Winston's stock will be confiscated and maybe a penalty will be imposed on Colorado Central.

"At any rate, I think you've helped to give us a clear track from here to Salt Lake. I'm no longer afraid of not beating Colorado Central. Winston's crooked dealings will ruin him. Let it snow all week. I don't give a hoot. When it stops we'll get the plows out, open up the track and get those supply trains running again. And we'll rebuild the trestle. Wyoming and Western is still laying steel."

"You bet it is, Colonel," Jim Brown said fervently. "And with yore permission I'd like to offer the Masked Rider a job with us—if he wants it."

"He can have it," said Darwin eagerly. He flashed a rueful smile. "I had Wayne Morgan tagged wrong at first and I reckon I did the same with you. I wouldn't believe Brown when he said the Masked Rider was square and honest. I don't care if you are an outlaw. We need a trouble shooter and the job is yours at three hundred a month. And I don't care about the mask you wear either. You can leave it on or off as you please —not that I wouldn't like to see beneath it."

The Masked Rider grinned, in spite of his pain.

But Blue Hawk recognized that there was pain, and saw dried blood on the back of the big man's hand.

"Senor is hurt."

"Just the arm, Hawk. It's all right." He looked at Darwin. "Thanks for yore offer. But Hawk and me are headed for California, just as soon as this storm lets up. But right now if there's a sawbones around—"

"Shore, shore!" said Jim Brown. "Over in the boardin' train. The railroad doc will fix that arm."

The Masked Rider stumbled off through the snow with Blue Hawk at his side. And the crowd of grinning workers broke ranks, made a path for him to pass. Their triumphant singing lifted to the wintry sky as they followed those two stalwart riders of the danger trails.

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FURTHER EXPLOITS OF THE MASKED RIDER IN

DEAD MAN'S RANCH

By LARRY A. HARRIS

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

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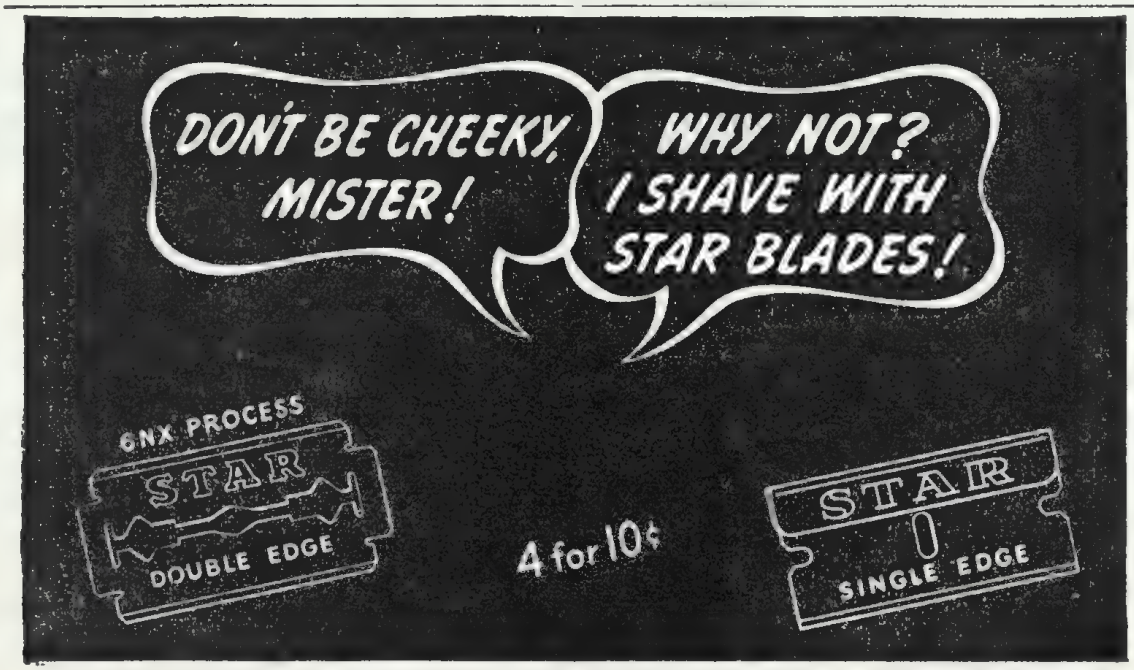

The blow landed and Faro Jack slumped limply to the floor

TEXAS JUSTICE

By CHAD YANCEY

Branded as a Killer, Pierce Kilday Braves Hangnoose Threat to Deliver a Dead Man's Message to a Texas Ranger's Home!

THE tall stranger rode purposefully yet warily up the rutted wagon road leading to the Y Bench home ranch, his uneasy gaze never still, his left hand hovering near the slick butt of a Colt .45 on his left thigh.

It was utterly dark save for a luminous glow from myriads of Texas stars. But the stranger had no eyes for the beauty of the night. He was thinking that every man in this outfit was a potential enemy, perhaps their girl-boss as well.

Anxious to dispose of a distasteful task, the man went straight to the big house looming whitely among whispering aspens on a knoll above the bunkhouse and corrals, and stepped lightly up on the veranda.

Slight as was the sound, a subdued murmur of voices inside ceased instantly; then a girl's voice hummed sweetly a lilting melody. The stranger's suddenly tensed features relaxed a trifle, and he knocked with imperative knuckles.

Quick, light steps approached the door. It opened to frame a slim figure in blue gingham against the mellow glow of a lamp in the hall beyond. The girl moved aside and let the lamplight touch the caller's face, inadvertently revealing her own.

Recognition tensed the stranger's lean form, pain darkened his gray eyes. That piquant young face with its dark-lashed brown eyes, so like Pete's had been! Eyes meant to be eager, laughing, but just now sobered under a hesitant frown.

Could he tell that sordid story to *her*—

Pete's sister? If only her older brother were here! That was ironical. Chip was a Ranger. No, the fulfillment of that promise to a dying boy could not be delayed longer.

At his prolonged stare a dusky red tinted the girl's cheeks.

"Good evening, stranger," she drawled with a quick, tabulating glance at his worn range attire and hard-lined features and the ominous set of his tied-down Colt.

The man let the grimness of his face soften fleetingly as he removed his sombrero.

"Evenin', ma'am. My name's Pierce. You're Jean Sanborn, boss of this outfit?"

She nodded. "If you're looking for work—"

"No. I have a message for yuh. It was for Chip, but they said in town he doesn't live here."

Her hesitance became marked.

"No—he doesn't. But come in."

THE girl preceded him to the living room through a curtained doorway. Pierce followed, hoping she wouldn't notice his stilted, uneven gait. That noticeable limp of his left leg was part of a certain description by which he was apt to be recognized inopportunely.

The spacious room with its stone fireplace and hand-made chairs and table was comfortably inviting, yet Pierce felt an unaccountable chill in his spine as he saw that there was no one present but Jean and himself. Probably she had a housekeeper who had been in talking to her, but—

Jean started to move a heavy chair nearer the fireplace. Pierce helped awkwardly, using only his gun-hand. He saw her glance curiously at his gloved right hand, the fingers of which did not appear quite natural under a close scrutiny.

But before he could make some careless explanation Jean's attention shifted suddenly past him and the tentative half-smile ran from her face like quicksilver as her dark eyes dilated in apprehension.

Pierce stiffened, stood rigid in the abrupt, pregnant silence. With studious carelessness he dropped the hat he still held in his gun-hand and let the hand inch back toward the holstered .45.

It touched cold walnut—and froze at the slither of steel on leather behind him. Too late!

Impelled by a nameless dread that gripped his vitals, Pierce turned stiffly to meet a smoldering gaze that, more than the menacing six-gun, riveted him to stunned immobility. In spite of his premonition of the man's identity, he could not repress a start of recognition at sight of the poignantly familiar figure before him.

Yet, it was not this that brought the flash of pain to the young outlaw's face; it was the utter contempt mirrored in Chip Sanborn's slitted eyes.

Old bitterness welled up anew in Pierce's mind. He had hoped to avoid this meeting. Had he dodged the law for all of two years only to have it brought home to him by Pete's brother?

The Ranger spoke first, his dry brittle tones breaking a silence that was rapidly charging with deadly tenseness.

"Pierce Kilday, ain't it? Wanted for killin' a sheriff up north. Why did yuh come?"

Pierce swallowed hard, spoke with difficulty.

"Looks like yuh were expectin' me, Ranger."

"I was. Me and Hugh Randall came to Rawhide lookin' for another gent, but we pulled in this afternoon just after yuh left. We were told that a stranger was askin' for me. The description of him tallied with a reward notice we have for a murderer. What do yuh want?"

Pierce shrugged coolly.

"Like I told Miss Jean, I've got a message to deliver. It was meant for you, but naturally I wasn't goin' to hunt yuh up after I learned yuh were a Ranger."

He hesitated, trying to choose the best approach for his story.

"I was lookin' for you folks up in the Panhandle, but nobody could—or would—tell me where yuh'd moved to. I just happened onto this Pecos country. In Rawhide I heard of the Sanborn ranch and asked for yuh. They said you and Miss Jean owned the Y Bench but you were a Ranger over at Corbett."

Chip's eyes gleamed darkly. He seemed tensed for action as he demanded with odd intentness:

"Who is this message from, that it's so important?"

"Pete," Pierce announced, watching closely to catch Chip's reaction.

The instant bleak shadowing of the

Ranger's face and a startled ejaculation from Jean gave him partial relief in the knowledge that both Sanborns were aware of the younger brother's death. But how much of the story did they know?

Jean came around to face him with sudden suspicion chasing incredulity from her dark eyes.

"A message from *Pete*, you say? Stranger, if this is a joke, or a game, it's in right bad taste!"

The stranger shook his head slowly, gray eyes chill.

"No, ma'am, it ain't no joke."

JEAN stared at him, not at all convinced.

"You know, of course, that Pete was—killed—two years ago?" she queried with emotion tempered by irony. "Has it taken two years for you to find us?"

Pierce met her mocking gaze directly.

"It has," he stated flatly. "I couldn't locate you folks where Pete said yuh were. He didn't even know that yore dad was gone."

"We couldn't send him word. After Dad's death, Chip and I sold the ranch and came down here because a friend of Dad's had asked Chip to join the Rangers here. We bought this outfit for the three of us: Chip, Pete, and myself. Months afterward we heard of Pete's death.

"This message you've brought, does it concern how he died?"

Pierce drew a deep breath and made the plunge.

"It was his last word, Miss Jean. He died in my arms, askin' me to be shore that his folks should know the truth."

"Then—then he wasn't a thief or a rustler?" the girl cried hopefully.

"Miss Jean, yore brother was the finest gent I've ever known, and the straightest. He never stole a critter, not even a maverick."

"Oh, I knew it!" She broke off, staring at her brother's granite hard face. "Chip," she began uncertainly, "you heard?"

"I heard," Chip said curtly. "Just what is the truth, Kilday?" he asked with poorly concealed sarcasm.

Pierce's eyes and face went grimly hard.

"I killed Sheriff Parker after he murdered Pete. He framed Pete, outlawed him, then killed him *legally*. I couldn't prove it so I called Parker and shot it out with him. But all the witnesses were friends of his. They swore it was murder and put a price on my head. That's all."

"So that's all?" Chip sneered in disbelief. "Pete was reckless and trustin'. And a gent that would deliberately ruin a fine kid like him—"

Chip holstered his gun with deliberate intent, the smoldering embers in his red-brown eyes fanning to fiery sparks of hatred.

The outlaw stiffened, steel-gray eyes darkening to almost blue then chilling to the color of wet steel. Sanborn's convictions were already stubbornly set.

He was ready to shoot it out with Pierce at the slightest excuse, law or no law—right now, before his sister. But one swift glance at the apprehensive Jean heightened Pierce's resolve to keep gunplay out of this.

"Sanborn, the last word yore brother said was for me to tell yuh that he was innocent," he declared evenly.

For a moment the Texan wavered, then stubbornness triumphed.

"Kilday, yuh lie! Yuh got Pete outlawed and killed, then murdered Parker in petty revenge. Since then yuh've killed often. I'm puttin' yuh under arrest right now!"

"Chip! You can't do that!" cried Jean. "This man came here as a friend to do us a favor!"

"Keep out of this, Jean!" her brother commanded tersely. "You don't know men of his type. All right, Kilday. Hand over yore gun or start shootin'!"

Pierce stared dully, his face drawn and haggard.

"Sanborn, you know I can't draw on yuh. Miss Jean, will yuh take my gun?"

The girl stepped forward hesitantly, but her gaze was frank and direct on his.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "And I'm thanking you."

She lifted the weapon and handed it to her brother without a word.

The Ranger scowled but took the gun and produced a pair of handcuffs. In awkward silence he snapped them on the outlaw's wrists. Only then did he look at his sister. Jean did not speak, but her silence was eloquent. With a muttered curse Chip swung on his prisoner.

"Get goin', Kilday! I aim to see yuh behind bars tonight!"

FOR some time the two men rode in thickening silence, the only sounds being the clip-clop of shod hooves and the creak of saddle leather and faint jingle of spur-chains.

Pierce had no intention of going peaceably to jail. Once they were well away from the ranch he began patiently to work off the soft kid glove from his right hand, letting Chestnut Burr pick his own way alongside the Ranger.

In the discordant silence the slight grating of the cuff links seemed to be shouting for attention. At last, the glove came free, and with it part of the forefinger and all of the thumb of his hand—the hand had been maimed in a roping accident years before, but so cleverly concealed by a built-up glove of his own making that few people had ever discovered it.

Now, once the glove was off, it was a simple matter to slip that link of the cuff over the maimed hand. Then, holding the dangling steel bracelets against his body to prevent their clinking, he forced the glove back on again.

Coolly the outlaw waited until they came to a stretch in the trail where thick buck-brush reached up a sloping bank from a gully running back into the hills.

He kicked Burr closer to the other horse and suddenly jabbed out with a spurred boot to rake the startled animal's hide and galvanize it to a bucking fury.

Whirling the chestnut off the trail, he sent it crashing down into the gully amid flying sand and snapping twigs. Behind him the lawman was struggling furiously to quiet his horse.

As Pierce reached level terrain two shots clipped brush on either side of him. He bent low, ducking his head to avoid slashing branches.

A third bullet hit something with a sickening thud, and the gallant chestnut lurched to its knees but scrambled up and ran on, its free stride tightened only a trifle.

Then a buzzing wasp cut deeply into Pierce's side, leaving its stinger imbedded. He grunted, slumped lower in the saddle.

More brush crashed behind Pierce, more slugs whined overhead. He swore as he recognized the growling bark of his own .45. Then he was out on an open flat, only the thudding of the chestnut's hoofs giving an audible target for the pursuer's bullets.

He reined into a side canyon, out of that into another, trusting to the sure footing of his mount to carry him safely over unseen ground. But Burr was faltering as the last sound of pursuit died away.

Pierce pulled up and moved ahead at a slow walk, then with a relieved sigh he got down to feel over the chestnut's quivering muscles. Down on the off hind leg there was a raw groove, wet and sticky. If the animal were forced to travel hard on that leg it would go lame quickly.

There in the dark Pierce attended to Burr's and his own wounds the best he could. While waiting for dawn to show him his next move, he passed the time doggedly filing the left cuff from his wrist with a steel horse-shoe. Then from his saddle-bags he got out an extra six-gun. It was Pete's, meant as a keep-sake for Chip. But the weapon was now to be used against him.

Dawn found both man and horse stiff with pain. They started off gingerly, the horse's limp so obvious that Pierce soon got off to walk.

The passing time found him growing more desperate as his own wound began to throb warningly. And then, first to the east then to the south appeared fast-growing dust-devils which he knew were not caused by wind. Posses closing in!

Could he elude them by hiding in these ragged hills? Wait! Another dust spiral ahead of him, and not a half mile distant! Pierce halted, watched with growing tenseness until he made out a single horseman, headed toward him. He was not a horse-thief but a forced swap was not exactly stealing.

Leaving the weary Burr hidden, he dropped behind a boulder, his gun awkwardly held in his right hand from which he had temporarily removed the glove because of the heat.

When the rider drew near, Pierce rose from his crouch and fired a warning shot.

"Pull up!" he commanded harshly. He grimaced in discomfort and slid the gun into his other hand.

THE rider reined in sharply, his gun appearing magically in his fist. He sent a wild shot careening past Pierce's head as he swept low on the off side of his mount.

Pierce jumped backward, firing with

cool deliberation. The other man gave a yelp of pain, dropped his weapon and straightened to whirl his mount in desperation. A second slug clipped the hat from his head.

"Hold it, mister! The next one's tagged for yore bread basket!" yelled the outlaw, running forward to crouch with deadly intent.

The fleeing man glanced back, then pulled the black to a rearing halt. He turned back, staring angrily from a pair of yellow-green eyes that gave his angular face a feline cast.

"Is this a hold-up?"

"No. Just shuck yore gun-belt and forget the gun."

The horseman obeyed grudgingly this order and the next to get off his horse. Then something akin to fear widened the cat eyes.

"You ain't aimin' to steal my hoss?"

"Why no. Just swap. My hoss needs rest, and I'm in a hurry. Now, you shuck yore saddle and slap mine on. And don't touch them rifles!"

Pierce watched the man's every move as he sullenly made the change, afterward testing the cinches to make sure they were fastened correctly.

Still keeping his captive covered, he shucked all the bullets out of the man's gun and tossed it into the brush. Then Pierce got stiffly aboard the rangy black, looping the reins over his right wrist. He motioned the other to walk ahead of him and followed closely a short distance, replacing the glove on his right hand.

"All right, Cat-eyes. Go on back. And take good care of my hoss!"

"I'll see yuh hung for this!" snarled the other man, quivering with rage.

The outlaw merely touched spurs to his new mount and loped on along the bench. Once out of the man's sight, he veered north back toward Y Bench range, figuring that they would expect him to try for the wild river brakes to the west.

Throughout the remaining hours of morning and afternoon the dust devils increased in number and spread to westward, gradually drawing the net tighter. Yet at sundown Pierce was still ahead of the northernmost possemen.

At length he rode out on a level bench where he could look down on the Rawhide-Y Bench trail. He would have to cross it to continue northward, but there was a rider on it now, heading westward toward the ranch.

Pierce waited impatiently at first, then with quickening interest. The rider was a woman. Jean Sanborn! With a darting glance up and down the trail, he reined the black down a ravine sloping to the flats below.

The girl halted on catching sight of him. Her dark-lashed eyes were deeply troubled.

"Pierce Kilday! What are you doing here?"

"Runnin'," he replied succintly. "Headin' north. They have all other ways closed."

"But north is closed, too! They've wired every town within a hundred miles. The Rangers will never quit until they get you!" She paused, searched his face intensely. "You didn't do it, did you? That hoss—it isn't yours. You weren't riding the chestnut? It wasn't you that killed Randall?"

"Killed — Randall!" Pierce echoed hoarsely, a sudden chill shooting up his spine. "What do yuh mean?"

Relief swept into the girl's cheeks.

"You didn't know Hugh Randall was shot from ambush this noon? And that Chip saw the killer—a limping, left-handed man ride off on a limping chestnut horse?"

PIERCE jerked back as though ice water had been dashed in his face. His pain and weariness were forgotten. Hugh Randall, Texas Ranger, murdered —his death blamed on Pierce Kilday! That hard-riding band of lawmen was on his trail! And *Chip* was the man who had seen the killing!

"How did it happen?" he asked dazedly.

"Chip and Randall had brought a posse from Rawhide and spread it out south and west. They kept in sight of each other. Right at noon Chip saw sunlight glint from metal beyond Randall. A rifle fired and Randall fell. It was a Winchester .44-40.

"Chip hunted the killer but was only in time to see him run for his horse and ride off. Randall wasn't dead yet so Chip couldn't leave him. Later someone took Randall's body back to town."

Bitter anger rose in the young outlaw's face. To his mind flashed that last blustering threat made by the cat-eyed man he had swapped horses with.

"I'll see yuh hung for this!"

"Miss Jean," Pierce said vehemently. "Do yuh know a gent with yellow-green eyes and a face ugly as a tom-cat's?"

"Why, that couldn't be anyone but John Blanchard, a gambler in the Lame Dog."

"Gambler, huh? Been around long?"

"About three weeks."

The smile that slipped over Pierce's tight face was like a frost-rimmed window at the close of a winter day.

"He ain't goin' to be around much longer then. Miss Jean, I ain't no killer, but Blanchard made the mistake of draggin' Chip and you into this frame-up. I don't aim to let him get away with it."

He whirled the black to send it racing eastward with the lengthening shadows, not trusting himself to speak further.

Pierce made a slow trip to Rawhide after darkness shrouded the hills, not riding the trail but paralleling it. Most of the manhunters were too far west and north to observe him.

He rode quietly down an alley back of the main street and left his mount tied in black shadow behind the Lame Dog. About to reconnoiter the place, he barely escaped being seen by a furtive figure just slipping into the livery stable a few hundred feet farther along the alley. There was something familiar about that dust-blanketed figure as lamplight from the stable struck it momentarily. It looked like Blanchard!

Pierce ran lightly to the stable door, eased it open with eager impatience. A wave of warm air pungent with the odors of sweaty horses and dry hay tickled his nostrils. Bales of hay, harness, buggies obstructed his view of the front.

Gun in hand he slipped inside. No one was in sight, but he detected the slither of boot soles somewhere ahead of him. Poking his head carefully between two bales, he saw Blanchard standing near a black horse tied in a stall, his hand clutching a bridle but his face turned toward the open front doorway.

Pierce muttered under his breath as he caught the sounds that were holding the gambler's attention: walking horses were approaching the stable.

Blanchard stepped into an empty stall, drawing his six-gun which he'd evidently retrieved from the brush. Pierce promptly moved to a position where he could see the gambler and the door. The horses stopped outside. There came the creaking of leather as someone dismounted and approached the door.

A tall man in stained buckskin came in, leading two saddled horses. At sight of the man Pierce tensed in bitter dismay: Chip again! And leading Pierce's lamed chestnut with Blanchard's saddle and rifle still on it! Maybe there was hope yet of proving him guilty.

SANBORN turned to care for the horses. At that Blanchard's angular face tightened into a satisfied smirk. He stepped out, gun in hand. Slight as the sound must have been, the Ranger whirled before Blanchard had stopped, his gun half-drawn when the gambler's cocked weapon stopped him.

Pierce came nearer pulling the trigger of his own gun in that split second than had Blanchard. He saw recognition and grim purpose in the lawman's eyes—remembered suddenly that Sanborn and Randall had come to Rawhide "looking for another gent." Here, then, was Blanchard's motive for murdering Randall; and Kilday had unluckily handed him his alibi.

"Howdy, Faro Jack," said Chip calmly. "I'm surprised yuh're still in the country. Or hadn't yuh heard we were after yuh?"

"Yeah, I heard," the gambler said coldly. "But that killer stole my hoss and set me afoot. I had to come in to get me a hoss. I see you got his mount there, and my hull."

Pierce wondered what the cat-eyed killer was up to now. Chip seemed puzzled, likewise.

"Stole yore hoss, eh? And this is yore outfit? The .44-40 too?"

"Shore. He held me up this mornin' and stole the whole outfit. I've been walkin' and hidin' all day." Blanchard spoke vindictively. "Reckon yuh'd better shuck that gun, then yuh can saddle this here black for me."

"He didn't take yore hogleg, eh?" pursued Chip.

"Made me shuck it but left it behind," was the glib retort.

Pierce's gray eyes glittered with cold hatred at this bald lie. If believed, it would cinch the law's case against him when added to the other evidence.

Suddenly Pierce's glance was caught by the restlessly fidgeting Chestnut Burr, which seemed trying to get away from Blanchard's vicinity. Its sides were badly

cut, crusted with dried blood and dirt. Pierce started, glanced quickly at Blanchard's small-rowelled spurs. Here it was!

He stepped softly around the bales of hay to stand with feet astride, six-gun fisted.

"We meet again, Cat-eyes," he murmured with ill-concealed satisfaction.

The gambler stiffened, stood rigid a second as Sanborn, loosening the cinches of the saddle on the chestnut, turned to stare past him in amazed speculation.

"Kilday!" the latter ejaculated.

Blanchard whirled, crouched in desperation as his gun came up spitting flame. But Pierce had leaped aside and fired as the killer pulled trigger.

Faro Jack staggered back against a stall, his bullets plunking into bales of hay. Pierce ran over to kick the gun from his hand, then faced around in time to stop Chip's lunge toward the gun-belt he had dropped.

"Not so fast, Sanborn!" he spoke tersely. "Stand up there by the hosses. Fine. You, Cat-eyes, get up on yore pins."

Blanchard glared at him, harsh features twisted in pain, and pasty white. A spreading wetness on the right shoulder of his coat almost matched the dust-encrusted splotch on his left upper arm.

Chip spoke up casually.

"So you hombres have swapped lead before, huh? If yuh were both better shots maybe yuh could save the State a lot of expense by salivatin' each other. Did Faro give yuh that little souvenir, Kilday, or did I?"

"You did," Pierce grunted, and made a gesture for quiet.

For several moments they listened in strained silence, but seemingly the shots, muffled in the stable, had not been noticed by townsfolk. At length Pierce continued.

"You did better shootin' in the dark, Sanborn, than he can in daylight. Leastwise, with a short gun. He did fine with that '76 Woostershire there, 'long about noon today."

THE Ranger started, dark eyes narrowing in swift, sharp speculation.

"Meanin'?"

"What I said. Cat-eyes stretched his story a mite when he said I stole all his outfit. I only took his hoss and left him *mine!*"

"That's a lie!" Blanchard cried.

Pierce smiled in cool disdain.

"Sanborn, take a look at Burr's hide. What cut him up like that?"

Chip never took his gaze from the outlaw's hard features.

"I saw that when I first caught him runnin' loose over west aways. Spurs did it, some time today."

"What *kind* of spurs?"

Chip looked swiftly from Kilday's boots to the gambler's, then to the latter's fast graying face. Little flecks of red appeared in the brown of his eyes. Slowly he replied.

"They were small rowelled spurs with only a few points. Those big sunset rowels of yores won't cut a hoss at all."

"And did yuh notice how Burr shied away from our gamblin' friend here? Yuh see, Ranger, Burr had never been cut by spurs."

Blanchard swore lividly. His face a mask of fiery hatred, he advanced deliberately toward Kilday.

"You hoss-stealin' coyote! Think yuh can get away with this?"

Grim joy lit Pierce's gray eyes as he lowered his gun. But it vanished before swift consternation. A flash of color beyond Sanborn jerked the outlaw's gaze to the stable door and held it riveted on the slender form framed there.

In that instant Blanchard leaped, both hands clawing catlike for a strangle-hold. Then the girl's startled cry pushed Pierce around, barely in time to avoid the talon fingers with a twisting side-step.

Sliding his gun into its holster, he swung to meet the raging gambler. Faro Jack feinted with his right arm and swung a vicious uppercut which Pierce partially blocked.

Pierce countered with two hard left-handed smashes to the gambler's jaw. Faro stumbled against the same bales of hay which encased his useless bullets, and bounced back with arms swinging wildly.

One heavy blow raked Pierce's torn side and sent a streak of fire through him. But he grinned coldly when Faro cried out with pain as a short jab missed his jaw and smacked his wounded shoulder.

By all rules the outlaw should have followed that up with a right-handed knockout blow. Instead, he had to recover his balance and swing with his left. It landed just off the point of the jaw, but Faro Jack slumped limply to the floor.

Pierce, breathing a little heavily, put a hand to his side to still the throbbing ache. With a start of remembrance he turned suddenly.

Foreboding shadowed his eyes anew and stiffened his lean body. Sanborn stood poised in curious indecision, his gun half-leveled.

Pierce flashed a sidelong glance at the white-faced girl, his own features paling as he caught the significance of a strange mixture of thankfulness and misgiving mirrored in her eyes.

Chip looked from Kilday to his sister, his frown deepening. He spoke suddenly, but on a subject that seemed totally irrevelant. Yet he was oddly intent.

"Kilday, yuh don't seem to use that right hand much. What's wrong with it?"

Pierce glanced irritably at his gloved hand. The thumb was slightly askew. He bit his lip in vexation as he deliberately adjusted the deceiving glove.

"Can yuh shoot with it?" Chip pursued more intently.

"Only with great difficulty. It's crippled."

Chip slammed his gun into its holster with emphasis, dark eyes gleaming.

"*How* is it crippled, Kilday? I've got to know!"

Pierce hesitated, sensing the undercurrent of earnestness in the lawman's attitude. He looked at Jean. She nodded, smiling tremulously. Pierce wordlessly began working the glove off.

CHIP examined the bared hand with an enthusiasm that seemed wholly out of place; then he let the semblance of a smile loosen his tight lips.

"Kilday, I don't reckon yuh'd be apt to carry a heavy rifle in that hand unless yore other hand or arm was hurt. I saw the hombre that killed Hugh run to his hoss carryin' his rifle that way. Besides, yuh'd never be accurate with a hand like that. With what yuh just showed me about Faro Jack, I reckon we know who killed Hugh."

Pierce let out his breath in a long sigh. One load was lifted from his mind. But the other? He was sick of running, of forever hiding, never knowing a friendly face, but he could not let Chip send him back to Wyoming to hang.

Jean touched Chip's arm.

[*Turn page*]

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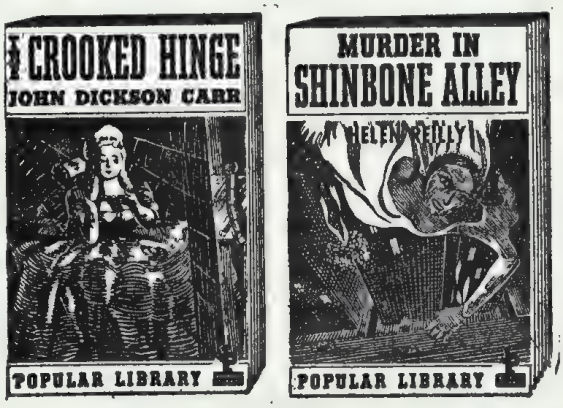

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"Chip," she said hesitantly, "what are you going to do now? I mean—about Pierce."

The Ranger stared at his sister a long moment, brown eyes narrowed searchingly, then turned to Pierce.

"Kilday, what yuh just did showed me somethin' else," he said slowly. "No man that's a killer at heart would've let Blanchard live after what he did, especially shootin' in self-defense. Nor tried to fight him with one hand. I'd like to hear that story yuh wanted to tell me about Pete."

Pierce was hard put to keep his gaze away from Jean's tense features and compelling eyes as he began his long-delayed story.

In spite of himself his bitter resentment colored and enlarged his description of the events leading up to Pete's death and his vivid recollection of the boy dying in his arms, life blood ebbing swiftly from six bullet holes in his back.

When Pierce's story was finished the Ranger's lean face seemed oddly akin to that of the man who had avenged his brother's death: haggard, pain-lined, with traces of bitterness. Yet it bore also a vast relief.

"Kilday," he murmured, drawing a ragged breath. "That job yuh did was half mine. Which puts me in yore debt." He ignored Pierce's quick protest. "Pete was my brother. Nothin' can change that. And yuh have a price on yore head because yuh paid a debt that was half mine. Maybe there's somethin' I can do to repay yuh."

"Then yuh believe Pete wasn't a rustler?" Pierce demanded.

"Yes. That's been a sore spot. Pierce, there's a chance that I can help yuh if yuh stay in Texas. Yuh see, Texas doesn't want yuh except on Wyoming's say-so. If our governor refused to extradite yuh, yuh'd be free—in Texas."

The outlaw stared speechlessly, gray eyes slowly lighting from dawning comprehension.

"*Free!* Yuh mean—yuh think—he would—?"

Chip's smile warmed his features to a nearer likeness of Pete's.

"I know him. He's square and reasonable. If he could hear that story from yuh the way yuh told it to me, and about how yuh rounded up this here Ranger-killer, he wouldn't send yuh back. Will yuh take the chance and go there with me?"

"Take the chance! There's only one answer to that!" Pierce ejaculated feelingly. "Here, take my gun. I'm plumb glad to be handin' it over!"

The Ranger's grin vanished as he looked at the weapon closely.

Pierce said quietly, "Pete wanted yuh to have it anyhow, Chip."

Jean abruptly threw back her head to meet Pierce's abashed gaze with a radiant smile.

"Chip, don't you think that Pete would have liked his friend to have his share of the ranch? If he'd known?"

"Sis', yuh have a bright idea there!" Chip chuckled. "Yuh've shore been needin' a good man to run the outfit. Pierce, are yuh willin'?"

Pierce could only stare mutely at the starry-eyed girl, but his answer was plain to be read in an eloquent face from which most of the bitterness had vanished.

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The ugly mule took a sharp nip at the ring-leader's pants

DEVIL'S DEADLINE

By ED EARL REPP

A Clever Ranger Dons a Tricky Disguise When He Comes Up Against a Passel of Feuding Ranchers and Enforces Six Gun Law!

THE threat of death hung like a heavy pall over Cuchillo town. Windows were shattered and doors barred. Even the mongrels skulking in the alleys seemed to prefer the gloomy shadows rather than amuse themselves barking at the heels of casual riders in the street.

"Slab" Kibbee, under-cover ace of Captain Bill MacDowell's Texas Ranger post at San Antone, noticed these things as he rode his ewe-necked hammerhead mule, Gabriel, up the dusty stem. Wearing the somber black garb of a typical frontier undertaker, he bore a great resemblance to an animated scarecrow propped loosely in the saddle.

His long legs, with the trousers tucked into plain black half-boots, almost touched the ground. Atop his dun-thatched head he wore a stovepipe

beaver held in place by a buckskin chin stay. His face was gaunt, with high cheek-bones and a predatory nose. Deep-set, his eyes were pale and droopy under heavy lids.

Those eyes missed nothing now. He saw that trouble was building here in Cuchillo for someone. Instinctively he flipped forward the tails of his black frock coat so that the butts of his matched Peacemakers pronged out within easy, unhampered reach.

A thick silence gripped the town. He could fairly feel the impact of impending danger. From a distance he saw two rival groups of gun-hung cattlemen and punchers eying each other menacingly like enraged range bulls protecting favored cows.

One group held the steps and porch of the Dobe Dollar Bar. The other outfit milled restlessly and ominously in front of the Organ Saloon, diagonally across the street. Slab's eyes became bleak as he observed how frequently the Organ bunch were hitting the batwings, going inside for, or emerging with, a building amount of bottled courage that he knew would eventually be the spark to explode a powder keg upon which both groups seemed to stand.

"If that happens," he reflected grimly, "I'm goin' to lose the shiny Ranger badge I got tucked inside my shirt pocket! Cap'n Bill don't like failures. Neither do I."

The word "failure" was not in the Ranger dictionary. It was not tolerated. That was why Slab Kibbee had been ordered to Cuchillo town under cover. He had to break up this trouble before too many men got killed. And only two men in all Texas knew Slab was MacDowell's ace agent. They were MacDowell and Slab Kibbee himself.

Word had reached San Antone that Hades was riding loose in Cuchillo, and MacDowell had a hard code for his men. It was—one Ranger to handle a riot. A Ranger and a hostler to smash a raiding party of border-hoppers. For an Indian uprising he usually sent two Rangers and the post cook. For taming a cowtown ruckus like this in Cuchillo — one Ranger. That was the order of the day, and it stuck.

DRAWN from his undertaking business by a shortage of hands, Slab had been sent to Cuchillo, understanding merely that an under-cover man was needed. By the looks of things there would be need for both a Ranger and an undertaker here in this community. Death glared back and forth across the street up ahead.

All MacDowell had been able to tell him from reports was that two big cattle outfits had been losing stock wholesale for some time. Each side blamed the other for the rustling. A bunch of other cowmen were being compelled to take sides in the dispute. It looked like the beginning of a healthy range war that might take hundreds of lives if left to develop like a careless cigarette tossed into a chaparral thicket.

Both factions were too proud, and felt too self-sufficient to call in the law. But somebody had reported to San Antone. And it was Slab Kibbee's business to see that this feud did not explode into unleashed violence. Tempers were still hot after the Civil War. Yankee carpet-baggers and the unscrupulous flocked southward. And although a Yankee by birth, Slab resented their transgressions as much as did the Johnny Rebels. Texas was overrun by almost as many renegades as there were longhorns.

He wondered just how far he would get under MacDowell's code — one Ranger to tame a wild cowtown ruckus that had probably already drawn its first blood!

Hatred hummed in the very air here. Something had brought matters to a head. Casually the Boot Hill specialist, who could kill a man as expertly as he could preserve the remains for eternal sleep, reined over to the porch of the Dobe Dollar. Not sure of his ground he drew Gabriel to a halt and had started to dismount when a gray-haired oldster, guns tied hard at his thighs, stepped forward.

"Hold yore hosses, mister," the old cowman bit out. "You a Brakeman man or a Larkin skunk?"

"I ain't shore yet." Slab grinned tightly. "Which is which?"

"Yuh're on the Brakeman side of the street now," said the oldster. "I'm Zeb Brakeman. Cross that deadline in the middle of the street and yuh're one of the Larkins. No mangier a bunch I never did see. They'd likely cut yuh down if yuh went over there after bein' here.

Which is all right with us till we know which side yuh're on. Shally Larkin and his brothers won't be askin'."

"I still ain't shore," said Slab, dismounting and walking to the steps. A dozen pairs of hard eyes watched his every movement. "What's it all about? I'm a stranger here. Come to Cuchillo to start an undertakin' business—"

"Then yuh'll have plenty of business," stated the oldster, Brakeman. "We aim to salivate every last skunk of that Larkin litter yonder. Better go get yore mortuary ready. We ain't got time now to pow-wow. Hightail before yuh get hurt."

Slab saw that he was in the center of a crossfire should it materialize. This was no place for him, if he were ever to bring this deadly feud to a peaceful finish.

"Come on over here, Boot Hill Man!" a wild-eyed ranny invited from across the street. "Us Larkins bury our own dead and we'll pay you a bunus for every Brakeman maverick yuh put six-feet under sod!"

Slab laughed tightly. "I reckon I'd better stay neutral," he said to Old Zeb Brakeman. "Looks like I'm too much wanted right now. Mebbe I'd better go get a slab ready. There'll probably be plenty of dead in Cuchillo before nightfall. But I'm short on formaldehyde. Any of you men object to bein' embalmed with alcohol instead? Don't last as long, but it'll keep a man long enough to get him buried."

Faces whitened among the Brakeman men. Slab imagined the faces of some of the Larkins crowd did likewise. He wasn't sure. But he was hitting a vital spot—fear of the hereafter, in the souls of the combatants.

Old Zeb recovered his voice after a gulping pause.

"I reckon only the Larkins'd like bein' pickled in alcohol, mister," he said. "We'll take ours as it comes and let the devil worry about the rest. Get goin'!"

With a dozen guns aimed at his brisket, Slab was only too glad to return to his saddle and ride out. He did not betray his anxiety, but hid it behind a tolerant smile that Old Zeb did not miss.

"That jigger reminds me of Abe Lincoln when he was my next-door neighbor," the oldster said thoughtfully. "Yuh never could tell what Abe was thinkin'. That undertaker's got the same kind of a poker face. Somethin' tells me he's on the right side of this ruckus!"

"Looks like a Larkin trick to me," declared another man. "We got to walk careful-like, Zeb. Them skunks are plenty wide betwixt the eyes or they wouldn't have snaked our cattle away that clean."

SLAB KIBBEE rode up the street a little way and swung over to the other side when he could no longer see the mark that had been scratched in the dust of the center, separating the two groups of feudists. A saloon called the Funnel of Beer confronted him.

"Just the place we're lookin' for," he said half aloud to Gabriel. "If we can make them two bunches realize a man's a long time dead when he dies, mebbe they'll slack off on the killin' idea and make some kind of a peace. We can set up our mortuary in the Funnel and throw a scare into them belligerents. Mebbe—."

He hit the ground at the tie-rack, tossed the reins over the rail and ducked under it on his way to the Funnel batwings. His boot heels clattered on the loose boards of the porch, but before he could enter the place he found himself staring into the twin bores of a scattergun shoved unceremoniously through the swing doors.

"Climb back on that hammerhead, mister," a rough voice ordered, "and get back to the Dobe Dollar. Us Larkins won't need no undertaker. Better go back and prepare the Brakeman crowd for Boot Hill. That's where they are headin'—on greased skids!"

"Shore are," said a second voice, one as mean as the first.

"Get goin', hombre," grated a third man. "Or yuh'll be the first to be embalmed in yore own undertakin' parlor!"

Slab looked up, feigning misunderstanding. "You men talkin' to me?" he gritted.

The batwings of the Funnel swung out. Three of the ugliest gunnies he had ever seen came boldly onto the covered porch. Surly-faced, underslung-jawed, and alike as three peas in a pod, he judged instantly they were either triplets or he was seeing three of a kind. He gulped in surprise.

The apparent leader of the gun-hung

trio rammed the muzzles of a sawed-off in his middle.

"Mebbe the sound of this blastin' yore innards through yore back'll make yuh savvy," he bit out. "Get movin'!"

"Shore," Slab said from between clenched teeth.

And his hands moved like bullbats diving in feeding flight, one sweeping the sawed-off aside, the other scooping a Peacemaker from its pouch.

Before his challenger could swing his weapon back into line, Slab's gun-barrel caught the gunny a glancing blow on the side of the head. He fell to his knees, blubbering like a frightened pup, blood seeping down over his ear.

Mad clear through by their unjustified attack, Slab swarmed over the other two, his gun arcking up and down, scattering them like tenpins. Then he caught the ring-leader by the seat of the pants and rammed the muzzle of his gun under his collar like a hook. Jacking him roughly off his feet he spun the Larkin man around and tossed him bodily into the street.

Out of the tails of his eyes he saw one of the other of the trio rushing forward to attack. Slab's bony left fist shot out and connected solidly. The power behind the straight-arm jolt and the man's impetus straightened him in his tracks. Then he was stumbling backward to sprawl beside the other in the street.

The Boot Hill specialist grinned fleetingly as Gabriel jerked free the loose reins from the top of the tie-rack and went for the two salty punchers. Eweneck stretched out, yellow teeth bared, the ugly mule clattered down on the pair like a cyclone, took a sharp nip at the ring-leader's pants seat and kicked at the other man, narrowly missing his head.

With yells of panic the two Larkins leaped to their feet and tore out of sight into an alley beside the Funnel, Gabriel after them. Slab whistled sharply and the mule turned, braying triumphantly, and came lumbering back to the rack.

The third man of the trio, overawed by Slab's exhibition of gunswift and strength, gulped hard as the Ranger ace spun to him.

"Get goin', Larkin man!" he ordered. "If you and them other two are samples of the toughs opposin' the Brakemans, yuh won't last long around here."

"Don't fool yoreself about that, mister," Larkin ground out. "Me'n my brothers'll pay yuh back for this! Yuh've chalked up yore mark as a Brakeman. We'll rub it out all right!"

"Get goin' before I get mad again!"

Slab shoved him off the porch and eared back his gun-hammer. The weapon erupted, sending the echoes smashing back and forth across the street. A chunk of lead tore boardwalk splinters around Larkin's heels. He wasted no time following his ugly brothers into the alley.

"Yuh're either a brave man or a plain fool, mister!" a creaky voice said behind Slab.

HE SPUN to face the proprietor of the Funnel standing in the half-open batwings. The aproned saloonman had the saddest visage he had ever beheld. His mouth drooped down at the sides, punching holes in the bags of fat hanging there.

"I ain't brave or a fool, barkeep." Slab relaxed, holstering his gun. "You the owner of this saloon?"

"I am, but wish I wasn't," the man said gloomily. "Since them three Larkins decided on usin' my Funnel Saloon for their private drinkin' place, I ain't had enough business outside of theirs to keep the flies happy. I'm Chad Funnel."

"Mebbe I've got a remedy for that," said Slab. "Somethin' tells me them three moose-faced galoots won't be around here much longer."

Chad Funnel's sad face looked sadder. "I reckon yuh won't be, either, mister," he voiced tonelessly. "Yuh're buckin' the toughest outfit I've ever ran across in all my years as a dealer in panther poison. Kurd Larkin—that's the one yuh tossed out first—is the meanest of them three. His brothers, Rake and Shalley—Shalley's the one that just chalked yuh up for a Brakeman—might not be so handy with their dukes, but they're whoopin' Hades with their cutters. They just love to catch a feller from a cutbank and gun him where his suspenders cross. Triplets, them three. The orniest pups ever whelped outside of a wolf's den. They'll get yuh."

Slab Kibbee betrayed interest. "They didn't make much of a start," he drawled. "Three to one. Shucks, I'd hardly call that fightin' odds."

He eyed the saloonman casually, deliberately drawing upon his store of knowledge about conditions here in Cuchillo town. Barkeeps were like newspapers. They knew all the range gossip. This one seemed inclined to talk.

"Yuh got that whole Larkin bunch against yuh," Funnel warned. "Yore odds'll be closer to ten to one. But if they mix it with the Brakemans, that'll help yuh out some. You a tinhorn, circuit rider or undertaker?"

"All three—sometimes," said Slab. "Undertakin' business ought to flourish here. Think them two bunches of catamounts'll shoot each other up?"

Funnel cocked an eye down the street. "They been threatenin' to quite a spell, and fetchin' in their friends for a big ruckus," he creaked. "But it looks like them Larkins are goin' to mark time. They're goin' into the Organ where them three whelps are cookin' up yore finish by now."

Slab looked toward the Organ. The tension in the street was lessening as the Larkin men trooped into the saloon, leaving the Brakeman crowd glowering after them. He liked to think his fight with the gunhung triplets had temporarily halted the wholesale slaughter that threatened. He realized he had drawn the ire of the Larkins and would have to walk light from here on. This break in the tension, he felt, was to his advantage. It would give him time to get at the bottom of the trouble and perhaps end it before the thing exploded in his face.

Taking desperate personal risks was his duty as a Ranger, as much so as watching over the safety of the citizens of Texas. Although he instinctively liked old Zeb Brakeman, he could not take sides or show partiality here until he knew the underlying causes for the hatred between the two groups. Somehow, he felt that the Larkins had violated some range code to foster the deadly feud.

The Ranger ace turned back to Funnel.

"Just what's between them that makes 'em so boogered, Funnel?" he asked bluntly. "I like to know the background of any gents I prepare for burial. Makes my chores easier."

"Well, it's a long story," said Funnel. "Most important part is, Zeb Brakeman owns the Triangle outfit. Them poison Larkins run the Circle L. Both sides been losin' plenty cattle and hosses. Each side accuses the other of the rustlin', but ain't quite shore of their ground. That's the only thing that's kept Zeb from cuttin' loose an' blastin' them Larkins."

"It ought to be easy to prove which side is doin' it," said Slab thoughtfully. "They could track them critters down."

Funnel shook his head. "Yuh don't know this country," he said. "The trails peter out up around Chimney Buttes. Beyond that the land is so cut-up yuh could hide an army in there without it bein' spotted."

Slab understood. "Who do you think is to blame?" he asked tersely.

"Not that I want to be quoted," the saloonman replied. "But there ain't no question in my mind but that them snake-eyed Larkins are. They're short-card artists, cutbankers and owlhooters of the worst breed, or I ain't no judge of men, hosses and likker."

"But yuh just said they'd been losin' stock, too," prodded Slab.

"Shore," acknowledged the saloonman. "That might be only a neat cover-up, the old razzle-dazzle to avoid suspicion. One thing's shore—they ain't lost a man yet, and that's what finally brought the trouble to a head. Zeb Brakeman lost his son. The kid rode out to Chimney Buttes on the quiet for a look-see, and ain't come back. The Triangle outfit combed that country bald, but couldn't find even a trace of him. They think the button was bushwhacked and hid. That's why tarnation is goin' to pop before long. The Brakemans have given Kurd Larkin an' his bunch till sundown tonight to produce that boy—or go to the smoke for a trigger finish."

SLAB'S eyes narrowed. So that was why the battle lines were so finely drawn. It boiled down to one thing. There was little time to do much scouting before lightning struck. Sundown would be about seven o'clock that evening. It was already past high noon.

As was characteristic with him, he made a sudden snap decision, rasping his thumb along his cartridge belt impatiently.

"If that's how it is," he said tersely, "I better get busy. Spread the word around that I'm goin' out lookin' for

the proper kind of pine for my caskets to bury them jaspers in. And make shore to tell Kurd Larkin that I'll be down at Chimney Buttes doin' my lookin'. Understand, Funnel?"

"Just leave it to me," the saloonman responded. "It might scare 'em out of killin' off each other!"

Slab Kibbee, under-cover Ranger ace, had no trouble locating Chimney Buttes. He had come to Cuchillo town from that direction and already knew something of the serried badlands thereabouts. The draw-washes were clogged with pine logs washed down from the higher Mad Dog Hills. It was a wild land, cloaked with high chaparral, cut deep with gullies and arroyos. Heat devils danced over the ocatillo, palo verde and chinaberry. The Buttes shoved needlelike pinnacles into the cobalt sky. Silence was overawing.

"It's so danged hot," he reflected, mopping his sweating face, "I bet the lizards go around carryin' sticks in their mouths so that when their feet start to burn they shove the sticks in the sand and climb up on 'em! Even Satan'd roast here!"

A worried frown corrugated his brows. He had learned all he wanted to know from the talkative Funnel. But apprehension for old Zeb Brakeman's son haunted him. And he wondered if Kurt Larkin and his two ugly sin-pimpled brothers would follow him out here.

He stopped only once to shuck his long frock coat. Removal of the clerical garb effected a complete change in him. No longer did he look like a Boot Hill specialist. Now he was a tied-hard gunman, his gaunt face set in hard, determined lines. Yet he looked lugubrious in the beaver hat he wore, cocked jauntily to the front to shade his pale eyes from the blistering sun.

His lips were bleak and tight, and he did look like the rail-splitter, Abe Lincoln, in his youth. Excepting for the guns snugging his thighs.

It was a desperate game he was playing now. If he didn't find young Brakeman by sundown, Cuchillo town was going to run red. Men would die wholesale and Captain MacDowell would go on a raving spree. A failure would be chalked against the Texas Rangers, blasting an otherwise clean and successful record.

Every inch a man-hunter now, Slab gigged Gabriel beyond the Buttes and scanned the rugged country ahead.

"How in the name of peace," he reflected, "can rustled stock be trailed this far and no farther?"

A gun-hammer clicked as it was eared back in a clump of mesquite to one side. Slab heard the deadly sound, sharp and clear as a rattler's warning. Too late he realized he had made one miscalculation. He had counted upon the mysterious long loopers picking up his trail, but not lying in wait for him.

Even as the thought brushed his mind he was twisting sideward, throwing his lank body out of the kak on the off-side from the hidden ambusher.

Level with his eyes he saw a chunk of leather gouge up from his saddle as a slug ripped past where his thighs had rested an instant before. The explosion of the gun smashed echoes through the chaparral. Then he was moving fast.

A second bullet sent a little puff of dust from the baggy knee of one trouser leg as he made at a high lope for a nest of rocks off to the side. A third missile of death geysered up a spurt of sand and grit within an inch of one boot toe. He whirled, desperately, with a yard or two to go before reaching the rocks.

Feeling like a cornered lobo, he sent lead spitting back at the puffs of gunsmoke lifting lazily from the brush. A slug smashed into the heel of one boot, almost upsetting him. Tripping his gun-hammers as swiftly as muscle and reflexes could act, he poured death into the mesquite, but seeing no visible target he could not tell what damage he was doing to his enemies.

DESPERATELY he spun around and like a winged bird hop-skipped on his heelless boot toward the rocky covert. As he reached it he realized he had made another error. Desperately he tipped his Colts and triggered. A swart Border breed, one of several ambushers lying in wait for him there, crumpled. He saw the barrel of Shalley Larkin's gun slashing down at his head. He hadn't a chance. This was it, for Slab Kibbee.

That was his last thought before the gun smashed him solidly on the side of the head. Blue lights exploded in front of his surprised eyes. Then he felt as if the sky had fallen upon him, engulfing him. He fought gamely to pull him-

self from beneath the dark blanket of unconsciousness. A voice, that of Kurd Larkin, penetrated the darkness of his brain:

"Why didn't yuh kill the meddlin' skunk, Shalley?" Kurt was saying. "This jigger's dangerous."

"I'd have drilled him," said Shalley, his voice seeming miles away, "but I want him to know when he goes out. He gunned Sabine cold!"

"Mebbe it's just as well," said Kurd. "We got somethin' to hand back to him. Besides, I'm curious to know why he horned in. If he's an undertaker, I'm General Lee! Bring him along. We'll head for the hide-out."

That was all Slab Kibbee heard. He felt himself lifted to Gabriel's back and flung over the saddle.

Every jolt of Gabriel's stiff-legged steps sent the blood thumping through Slab's battered head. In the dim recesses of his brain he knew he was being taken to the longloopers' hideout. A vague idea came to him that perhaps Zeb Brakeman's boy was there. One thing uppermost in the back of his mind was that he had to rescue the lad and get him to Cuchillo before the gunsmoke deadline.

Full consciousness returned to him gradually. Each step of the mount beneath him jarred a little more understanding into his aching skull. He didn't know how far they had traveled, but when his vision cleared he could see Chimney Buttes punching up far behind.

The cavalcade was moving toward a 'dobe house, low and squat, tucked away in the depths of a box canyon ahead. Fat cattle and horses grazed along the bottomland. By craning his neck, Slab could see many Triangle brands mixed with Circle L. The whole setup was well hidden behind an interlacing maze of arroyos, cutbanks and dense chaparral jungles where a tracker would be forced to follow even the clearest of trails on hands and knees.

Slab's unprotected legs and shoulders felt raw from brushing against the thorny stuff of the badlands. The ground underneath was hardpan and the ring of hoofs told him there would be little or no trail to be followed.

"These Larkins are plenty mean," he told himself. "Stealin' their own cattle and all the time eggin' the Brakeman crowd to make the first move so's the Circle L men could claim self-defense after a wipe-out. That'd clear 'em and give the Circle L every critter they rustled. And I'll be a coyote if they don't do it yet unless I'm able to pull that missin' kid out of the fire."

Somehow he had a feeling that the Brakeman boy was alive, else it was certain the Triangle searchers would have spotted buzzards, like bits of black paper circling in the air currents, over the remains. It was a hope he held, anyway, if no more.

One thing impressed him. Chad Funnel had done his chore well and hadn't wasted any time. The Larkin trio of killers were here, with members of their unholy crew. There was no doubt in Slab's mind now who was guilty.

Had it been the Brakemans, they would have snared him, instead of the Larkins doing it, if only to allay suspicions. But there was the ugly three—the gun-slung triplets of the Larkin clan, leading this cavalcade of treachery and possible murder. He had no idea how he would end up in their keeping. The worst was the best he could expect from them.

Someone finally slipped up to Slab on the off-side of Gabriel and cut the thongs binding the Ranger's feet. When the renegade came around to the opposite side to release his wrists, he feigned unconsciousness. He was pulled from the mule and lugged into the house.

AS THEY went he realized he hadn't a chance here. Beside the trigger trio of Larkin brothers there were three double-gunned Border-hoppers. Disarmed as he was it would have been plain suicide tackling them.

"Toss him in with Brakeman's kid," Kurd Larkin drawled. "He might as well keep young Tod company till we need him to bait the trap for his old man."

A thrill shot through the Ranger. Tod Brakeman was still alive after all! Slab's determination to smash this gang suddenly became an obsession. Cowardly, and doubtful of their ability to whip the Triangle faction, the Larkins were holding young Tod as an ace in the hole to protect their own scurvied skins, should they find the going too tough for them.

Now one of the renegades opened a solid door in a corner. The pair carrying Slab gave his inert body a heave.

He sailed into darkness and landed with a thump that jarred his teeth. The door was slammed shut behind him. A bar fell into place.

His head reeled for an instant and then as he shook the fog from it and cleared his eyes he saw a pale shaft of light filtering in from a barred window set high up in the wall. It was a minute or so before his vision became accustomed to the gloom and he picked out the form of Tod Brakeman squatting on the floor of a corner.

"That you, Tod?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," the stubborn-faced young puncher replied and slipped forward. He looked like his father, had the same bold features. "You one of Dad's hands?"

"No," said Slab, propping himself against the wall. "But we're both in a tight pickle here. The Larkins are usin' you to bait yore dad and the Triangle outfit into a gunsmoke wipe-out, and if we don't get yuh into Cuchillo by sundown, there's goin' to be a ruckus."

Young Tod dropped his tall, lean length down beside Slab.

"I wondered why they didn't polish me off instead of takin' me prisoner," he said grimly. "But we haven't got a chance of gettin' out of here. Or reachin' town in time. When the sun passes that hole in the wall up there, it's gettin' plumb close to settin'. In two hours now it'll be down."

Slab thought hard.

"We've got to get yuh there somehow," he said finally. "The Larkins'll be goin' back to throw their guns against yore old man. And I'll lose my job."

"What job?" Tod asked quietly.

Slab's fingers felt for the Ranger badge pinned inside his shirt pocket.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm just an undertaker anyway for lettin' myself get snared. Let's work on that door."

"It's solid oak," Tod volunteered. "Barred on the outside. I tried to lift the bar through a crack with my knife, but busted the blade."

Slab had his Barlow knife out and open before he reached the door. Tod followed and showed him where he had gouged deep into the oak in an attempt to raise the bar. Through the thin crack the Ranger could see into the other room. The heavy oaken bar lay in its cradles just above.

Seated at a table out there were two of the Border-men, idly playing stud poker. Slab's hopes fell. He was sure the scraping of his blade would be heard. But he fell to work, muffling the sound by holding the blade close up to the point.

The Barlow was razor sharp and under his strong guidance shaved long slivers of oak, tinder-dried by years of Texas heat, from the planks of the door. Working upward behind the bar he soon opened enough space for him to lift the block. But he knew it had to be done rapidly and with a jerk, else it would simply fall back into the cradle. Even then only luck would make the bar miss the iron rest and drop it to the floor outside. This was no time to hesitate though, he realized.

"Get ready to shove soon as I throw up the bar," he whispered harshly into Tod's ear. "Mebbe we can bust in on them two jaspers and grab their cutters before they can recover from their surprise. All set? This is sink or swim now."

Eager for the test, young Brakeman's eyes glowed in the gloom. It was plain to Slab that the outlaws figured him too much done-in to make any immediate attempt to break out of his prison. And the element of surprise would again be in the Ranger's favor.

NOW he was carefully inserting his blade in the crack beneath the bar. His blood hammered at his temples and made his head throb. The goose-egg made by the gun blow felt as big as a house. The only thing that had saved him from being killed had been the stovepipe beaver.

Suddenly he heaved up on the Barlow handle. The bar outside lifted. With a quick jerk he threw it up as high as the crack in the planks would permit him. Tod Brakeman was ready. Before the bar had a chance to fall back into its cradle he was throwing his weight against the door. It burst open and his tall body was thrown into the other room.

Kibbee fell sprawling on his face. That saved his life, for the two renegades were on their feet in a trice and had their guns palmed. The first slug passed through the space where Tod had been a moment before, singing harmlessly past Slab. Then the Barlow was

spinning through the air, hastily thrown by the Ranger. He hated the practices of a buscadero, but in tights like this he had no qualms.

The Barlow struck the foremost outlaw in the throat and half disappeared as it buried itself beyond the hilt. A hoarse squawk issued from the man's lips and as he threw up his hands, he let his gun go. It skittered along the floor toward Slab. Like a rattler darting at a victim he dived for the weapon.

Lead from the second man's gun smashed into the hard-packed dirt floor near Slab Kibbee's face. But it missed. Then he was triggering from his prone position. The renegade took it in the brisket and went down on top of the first one.

"Grab his cutters and come on, Tod!"

Slab was up in a jiffy and relieving the pig-stuck renegade of his other gun. He shuddered at the sight his Barlow had created, and left it there. Tod pounced on the guns of the second man.

They shoved erect, but halted in their tracks as running feet sounded on the veranda outside. Then the door was smashed open. The Larkin triplets backed by the remaining Border-hopper and a spade-chinned puncher, pushed in, guns palmed.

Shock rode the faces of the Larkins when they saw the carnage here and Slab, sided by young Tod, standing half crouched in the middle of the floor, a cocked Colt in each hand. Pinned to a loose flap, Slab's badge now hung in full view outside his shirt pocket.

"Pitch up and come peaceful, you Larkins!" Slab bit out.

In the face of death it was his duty as a Ranger to give his enemies a chance to surrender. It was part of the code. But the murderous look on Kurd Larkin's evil visage betrayed his refusal to accept. "Like the devil we will—Mr. Ranger Man!" he swore. "I had yuh pegged all night. Take it—"

His gun flipped up and erupted. But Slab Kibbee was moving fast. His long legs sprung him to one side. And then he was triggering.

"Get down, Tod!" he yelled through the acrid gunsmoke that curled up into his mask-like face. "Pour it on thick!"

Kurd Larkin's gun was blasted from his hand by the Ranger's first shot. The shock of the lead sent him spinning like a pinwheel into a corner. In a panic the

"Who—Are You? And Why Did You Save My Life?"

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rest jammed the doorway in an effort to get out, then realizing their danger, scattered about the portal.

"Like shootin' wildcats in a barrel!" Slab yelled. "Come on, you Larkins! I thought yuh was tough!"

His guns working like pistols he rammed leaden death at Rake and Shalley Larkin. Gun concussion made the room reel. Through the smoke he saw the mean face of Rake whiten as a slug caught him above the belt. He folded over on his face.

Seeing his brother die, Shalley Larkin lost his head and all control. He charged forward at Slab, lifting his gun high to beat him to death. Slab was half turned away, dishing it out to the spade-chinned puncher.

From his prone position on the floor, young Tod drew his first blood.

SHALLEY took twin slugs full in the chest, halting him dead in his tracks. A haunting scream issued from his throat. It froze the blood of even the hard-bitten Boot Hill specialist. Slab turned just in time to see the Larkin killer going down on rubbery legs. He slid forward on his face and lay still.

It was all over now. The gun explosions ending suddenly, the room was silent as a tomb except for Kurd's cowardly blubbering. He was nursing his smashed gun-hand in the corner, his thoughts only for himself. He betrayed no interest in the violent passing of his kin or the others. His right hand looked a bloody pulp and any courage he might have had had flowed out upon the floor in a red stain.

"I'm bleedin' to death!" he babbled almost incoherently. "Stop it! Stop it!"

"Yellow as they make 'em," Slab scourged as he jerked the renegade to his feet and looked at the hand. "Shucks, yuh only lost a couple of fingers, Larkin." And he said to Tod, "Go get a couple of mounts and fetch up my mule while I put a tourniquet on this jigger. Shake a leg. I want him and you in Cuchillo pronto to stop that scrap. Then we'll see about fixin' up a nice tight rope for his mangy neck!"

"That'll be one hangin' I wouldn't want to miss." Tod grinned as he hurried for the door. "Even if I have to go clear to the San Antone gallows to see it!"

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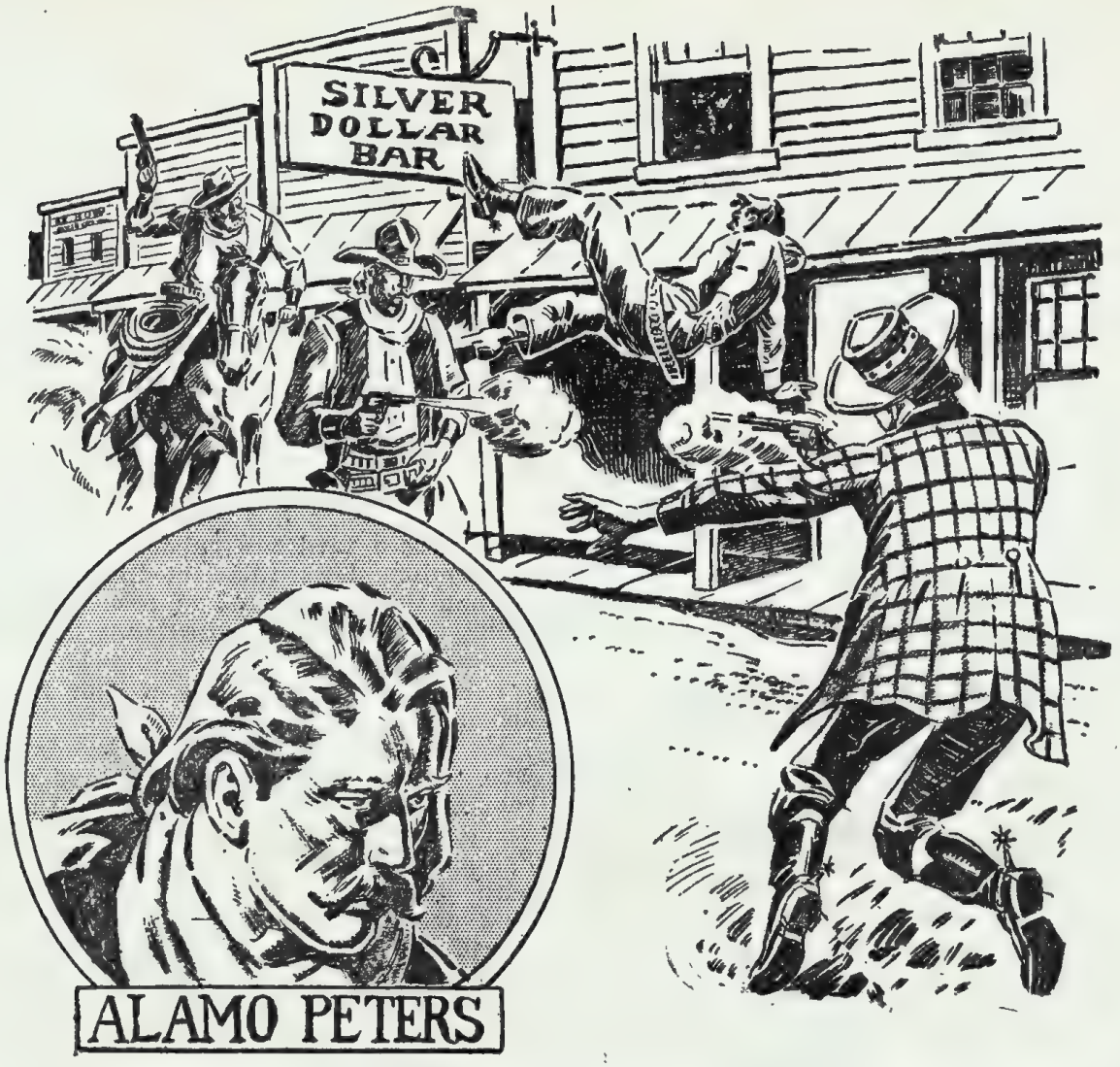

Jabez Peters' shot went right where he wanted it

THE GUNSMOKY YEARS

By GUNNISON STEELE

Two Old-Timers Bury the Hatchet When They Join Hands to Rid Ox-bow Town of a Range Hog and Tinhorn!

OLD Jabez "Alamo" Peters went headfirst through the saloon doorway and sprawled without dignity in the hot gray dust of Ox Bow's street. He lay there a moment, stunned, conscious of low, sneering laughter in the saloon. Then helpless rage boiled up inside him as he looked up at the man who had kicked him.

Tait Ivor was a big, flashily dressed hombre, with cruelty and arrogance stamped on his dark features.

"We got no use for deadbeats an' hoboes here," he sneered. "Get out of town, old man, an' stay out!"

Jabez rose slowly to his feet. A quick flame of anger had whipped the shame from his eyes. His thin, stooped body crouched a little, and his gnarled fingers spread outward from his thigh.

Then the hand fell away, empty, and Jabez' shoulders slumped. He wore no gun.

"I ain't no hobo, mister," he said meekly. "I just wanted to sit in there an' rest for a spell."

"Get out of town, pronto!" Tait Ivor repeated flatly, and turned and re-en-

tered the Taos Queen saloon.

The hot flame died out of Jabez Peters' squinty eyes. He turned and trudged slowly up the middle of the street, his scuffed boots sinking deep into the dust. Now, as never before, he felt old and useless and beaten, and shame was bitter as gall inside him. For a moment, back there, the old fierce flame had blazed inside him. Now, before his helplessness, it had winked out again like a light in a windy night.

He could remember when he would have faced Tait Ivor, man to man, gun to gun, and beaten him. . . . Now he had no gun. He was broke, and hunger gnawed like a horde of rats at his stomach. Those other years, when his name had been spoken with respect and awe, now seemed incredibly distant. Now he was just a hobo, unrecognized, to be kicked into the dusty street.

JABEZ' thing lips curled down at the corners. He owed Tait Ivor one for that kick. Tait Ivor, he knew, was a big-shot gambler and rancher in the basin. He was running wild, stealing, grabbing, trampling on the rights of other men. But Jabez didn't care a hoot what happened to anybody else. Tait Ivor would pay for that kick, when Jabez got around to it.

Right now, he had other business to attend to. He had to collect back pay for thirty, gray, soul-rotting years. He was striding along the street, tightening his belt, trying to ignore the savory odors that drifted to his nostrils as he passed a doorway.

A tow-headed puncher had dismounted and was tying his bronc at a hitchrack. "Sonny, could yuh mebbe tell me where I could find Sheriff Bill Shane?" Jabez asked him.

The puncher looked puzzled. "Mebbe you mean Sheriff Sam Teak, oldtimer?"

"Bill Shane," Jabez insisted. "Thirty years ago—"

"Oh, yuh mean old Silvertip Shane." The waddy grinned. "Silvertip used to be sheriff back before I was born. He owns a little cow outfit twenty miles to the west, over on Badger Creek. The Star K. Take the west trail, oldtimer, an' yuh can't miss it."

Jabez raked a hand dazedly across his eyes. Again, he'd forgotten those years in between. Some folks *had* called Bill Shane, "Silvertip," even then. Silvertip Shane, sheriff of tough Ox Bow, with the fastest gun in all Arizona—except for one. And that one had been Jabez Peters'!

Now Silvertip wasn't even sheriff anymore. But that couldn't change matters. He was still the man Jabez had hated and planned to kill for thirty endless years. He was the man who had finally cornered Jabez in the Modocs, captured him, sent him to the pen.

Jabez went to the livery stable, where that morning he had paid out his last dollar for a feed and rubdown for his skinny dun. He saddled the dun, mounted, and rode slowly out of town. And, riding out over the flat grasslands, he momentarily forgot the indignity he had just suffered at the hands of Tait Ivor and his cronies.

He was remembering those other days, when his and Silvertip Shane's blood had been hot and wild. Days filled with the fierce love of fighting and laughing and living. Two strong, untamed men, men with gunpowder staining their blood. And deadly enemies—Silvertip Shane, sheriff and Jabez Peters, outlaw.

The sun was hot as Jabez rode along the west trail, but he didn't feel the heat. He had forgotten his hunger. His eyes dimmed with memories as he passed familiar landmarks. This was the land of his wild, untamed youth. Old, half-forgotten scenes returned to parade endlessly through his mind.

The sun and dust and savage heat. The rumble of horses' hoofs and wagon wheels. The bright glare of sunlight on newly built shacks that shook to the boom of blasting powder. Ox Bow, spawned overnight, a roaring, swaggering young giant, drunk on blood and whisky and new gold, seething with strutting, quick-tempered men and bold-eyed, over-painted women. Wild days, red, boisterous nights. The home of his youth. . . .

This wild county Sheriff Bill "Silvertip" Shane had ruled with iron fists and a fast gun. A rule disputed only by a slender, yellow-haired young cowboy whose wildness had carried him early beyond the law. A saga of the raw frontier, the bitter gun-feud between these two. A saga of naked red courage and blazing guns, made all the more bitter by the deep-rooted respect each held for

the other. For each, having chosen his own trail, had also clung to his own iron code of right and wrong.

As he rode along, Jabez' eyes lifted to a jumble of low brown peaks to the north. There, among those peaks, a posse led by Silvertip Shane had cornered Jabez Peters for the final showdown in a blind canyon. Only after he lay unconscious on the sun-blistered rocks, riddled by bullets, was Jabez captured.

Then . . . jail. The verdict, guilty, life imprisonment. The interminable years, away from the wind and sunshine . . . and, suddenly, the pardon, after thirty years. Certain friends, the warden had said, had been working a long time for his release.

Jabez grinned sardonically. He had no friends. And he had come back to find everything changed. Ox Bow was no longer the swaggering, quarrelsome young giant he had known, but a sleepy cowtown. . .

A QUICK clatter of hoofs sounded behind Jabez. He stopped, whirled the dun. A rider was coming swiftly toward him—a slim dark-haired girl riding a wiry buckskin pony. She rode up to him, and stopped, smiling.

Jabez fumbled for his hat, stammered, "I—howdy, miss! I must of kind of dozed there for a minute."

"Yes, you must have." Her quick laughter was silvery. "And I don't wonder. Everything is so quiet and beautiful. Do you belong here in the basin?"

Jabez liked the girl's looks. "Might say I do," he said. "I lived here once, but I been away a long time."

"And now, you don't have any home?"

Jabez flushed. "Not rightly, miss. Reckon I got an itchin' foot. Anywhere's home to me."

The girl had stopped smiling. "I saw what happened back there in town," she said soberly. "Tait Ivor is a beast. I followed you out here. You don't have to pretend with me, oldtimer. How long since you ate?"

Jabez knew there wouldn't be any use lying to her. "I reckon it was about this time yesterday, since I had a bite."

She smiled that quick smile again. "Then I reckon you must be feeling pretty empty. Just keep going the way you're headed, along with me."

Jabez found himself riding along beside the girl. She talked his kind of talk, hadn't wasted words on mushy sympathy.

"Maybe we bettter get acquainted," she said, after a while. "My name's Sandra Shane!"

Jabez Peters' wiry body stiffened a little. "No kin to Silvertip Shane, I reckon," he asked, stiff-lipped.

"My father," she affirmed proudly. "You know him?"

"Yuh ever hear of Jabez Peters?" he countered.

She looked quickly at him. "Not Jabez Peters, the—the old-time gunman?" she whispered.

Jabez nodded. His brain was whirling a little. This slim, dark-eyed girl—Silvertip Shane's kid!

"Of *course* I've heard of you," the girl was saying eagerly. "Nobody could be around Daddy long and not hear him talk about you. He liked you, and he was sorry his feud with you ended like it did. He said that any man who fought as hard and square as you did, couldn't be all bad."

"Well," Jabez admitted grudgingly, "that catamount was a square-shooter, too, dang him! But I'd have got him if I could, that time up in the Modocs."

"He knew that. But that didn't keep him from trying, from the start to get you pardoned."

Jabez swallowed hard, staring straight ahead. By Jehosephat, things were all mixed up! He didn't want any favors from Silvertip Shane. He'd come back to Ox Box, aiming to face Silvertip through gunsmoke. Now it wouldn't be so easy.

"How come Silvertip ain't sheriffin' no more?" he asked.

"Why, Daddy quit wearing a badge five years after they—you went away. He got into a fight with some outlaws, and his gun-arm was badly hurt. It didn't heal right, ruining his speed, so he quit and took to ranching. I bet he'll be surprised to see you—and glad, too!"

Jabez hardly knew what they talked about as they rode on along the trail. Sandra Shane thought he'd come back to visit her father, instead of kill him.

Before Jabez could fully make up his mind what he aimed to do about it, they arrived at Silvertip's little Star K outfit.

THIRTY years had thickened Silvertip Shane's great body, lined his craggy face, whitened his hair. He stood in front of the weather-beaten little ranchhouse, watching as his daughter and Jabez rode up. It was plain that, at first, he didn't recognize Jabez.

"Yo're a little late, girl," he boomed. "And who's that gent with yuh?"

Looking from one to the other, Sandra said nothing. Jabez sat tense in the saddle, staring at Silvertip Shane. The man who had hounded him to prison.

For thirty years Jabez Peters had lived for this moment. But now, strangely, he didn't feel the mighty upsurge of savage hatred that he'd expected. Instead—by thunderation—he was almost glad to see the old hellion!

Silvertip was grinning suddenly, striding forward. "Devil's hogpen and little speckled pigs!" he yelped. "If it ain't ol' Jabez Peters! Thought we'd got rid of yuh for good."

"Did, huh?" Jabez snorted. "Why, yuh danged ol' wolf, I'll still be here howlin' when yore dead and gone!"

Then Silvertip was pumping his hand, swearing. "Dang-blast it, Jabez, it's good to see a real he-man again!"

Jabez started to jerk his hand loose. He stole a glance at the girl. She was smiling. He gripped Silvertip's big hand.

That night, after they'd eaten, Jabez and Silvertip sat on the ranchhouse porch. A yellow moon silvered the rangeland and a cool wind blew down from the peaks. A little while ago, Sandra had ridden off across the range with a tall, good-looking cowboy, bright-eyed and obviously in love.

"A fine, clean boy, Jim Calhoun," Silvertip had said. "He would have suited Sara for a son-in-law, if she'd lived."

They talked for a long while there in the cool shadows. At first Jabez was cautious and reserved, trying to work up to the thing he'd come here to do. Gradually, as they talked, the years rolled back, and they relived those seething days and nights of their gunsmoke youth, when life was at its quickest—and they were deadly enemies.

It seemed that they could hear the clank and rattle of great freight-wagon trains echoing in the night, and hear the ribald curses of sweating muleskinners rising to a saffron sky. Ox Bow, emerging full-grown and bawling from the shadows of one night. Its rutted streets alive with roughly dressed men, gun-belted and with knives protruding from boot-tops. Honest men, thieves, killers; miners, cowmen, preachers and tinhorn gamblers—all rubbing shoulders in the hot, dusty, roaring streets.

And, out-bullying and out-fighting them all, each with his own iron creed: Silvertip Shane, sheriff—and Jabez Peters, outlaw. . . .

Next day, Jabez rode out over the range with Silvertip. The Star K was a sweet little outfit. Lush grass, plenty of good water. But Silvertip kept no riders, and Jabez quickly saw that few cattle grazed his range. And, before the day was over, Jabez discovered why.

Tait Ivor was behind it, as he was behind most of the trouble in the basin.

"He's out to grab every foot of range he can," Silvertip declared. "Tait Ivor showed up here five years ago, just a two-bit, tinhorn gambler. He won a couple of little outfits with a crooked deck. Now he owns several others, includin' the big Double X outfit joinin' my place on the north, an' the Taos Queen in Ox Bow. Lightnin' fast with a gun, he's killed half a dozen men."

"What's all that got to do with yuh not havin' any beef stuff on yore range?"

"A couple of years ago, Ivor decided he wanted my outfit. I wouldn't sell, so he set in to freeze me out. In my own mind, I know he's the skunk that's stolen most of my cows, even poisoned a couple of water-holes."

"Ain't but one kind of talk hombres like that savvy. Powdersmoke talk!" Jabez declared grimly.

Silvertip's face looked haggard.

"That's just it," he said worriedly. "Lately, things have got a lot worse. Tait Ivor, seein' I wouldn't run, has been tryin' to pull me into a gunfight, so he can kill me. An' he *would* kill me, if I matched guns with him. Once I could have shaded him, easy, the same as you. But that was before my arm got busted. I can still shoot, once I get my gun unleathered—but I can't draw for shucks. Ivor would fill me full of lead while I was tryin' to unleather. He knows that, and he never misses a chance to make me eat dirt."

"Yore girl know about all that?"

"Yeah! And that's the reason I ain't met Ivor, long ago. But, by Christmas,

I can't stand much more. After the gal's safely married . . . ."

THAT night, Jabez lay awake a long time, staring into the darkness. Now, more than ever, he was all mixed up. He'd returned to Ox Bow to kill Silvertip Shane—and here he was sleeping in Silvertip's bed, eating Silvertip's grub, with the original idea of killing Silvertip growing dimmer and dimmer in his mind! That, he knew, wouldn't do. It didn't make sense. A man didn't change like that, almost overnight.

He had a gun, now, an old range six-shooter Silvertip had loaned him. But he couldn't call for a showdown now, with Silvertip's gun, on Silvertip's range. But he'd think of a way.

Meanwhile, he found himself hating Tait Ivor more and more. Not because of what he was trying to do to Silvertip and Sandra, he told himself, but because of the humiliation he'd undergone at Ivor's hands—and feet—in Ox Bow.

Several days passed. Jabez helped Silvertip with the few cattle he had left. Sandra made a hand. There was lithe strength in her graceful young body, and she handled cattle like a man.

One day, Silvertip rode into town after supplies. He didn't wear a gun, knowing that even Tait Ivor wouldn't kill a man who wasn't packing a gun. But old Silvertip returned, grim-faced and raging. Ivor had tried to start trouble, accusing Silvertip of stealing Double X cattle. He'd cursed Silvertip, and sneered at him for not having nerve enough to wear a gun.

"Next time I ride into town," Silvertip declared fiercely, "I'll pack a gun!"

"No, Daddy!" Sandra said quickly. "Don't you see, that's what he wants? You wouldn't have a chance. Surely, there must be *somebody* who can beat Tait Ivor with a gun!"

It gave Jabez a queer feeling, having her look straight at him as she said that. He turned away, saying nothing. Silvertip had made his own bed—now let him lie in it.

But the thought made him feel cold and uneasy inside. He became more than ever confused. He took to riding out over the range alone, trying to figure out what to do. But he still hadn't decided when, one morning a week after Silvertip's run-in with Ivor, he rode back from mending a cut fence and found Sandra alone and desperate-eyed at the ranch-house.

"I've been waiting for you, Jabez," she said swiftly. "You—I thought maybe you could do something. As you know, Daddy rode into town early this morning. A little while ago he came back, crazy angry, and got his gun. He'd quarreled again with Tait Ivor. And Ivor dared Daddy to meet him on Ox Bow's main street for a showdown. Said the whole range would know he was yellow if he didn't do it."

"And Silvertip aims to do it?"

"Yes! He said he *had* to do it, or get out of the basin. But he wouldn't have a chance, even if he was fast with a gun. Tait Ivor's a coward—he'll trick anybody he fights. Maybe you could overtake Daddy, Jabez, and stop him, before it's too late!"

Without answering, Jabez whirled the rangy roan he was on and pounded off down the trail toward Ox Bow. Suddenly he knew that letting Tait Ivor kill Silvertip *wouldn't* serve the same purpose. Five miles from Ox Bow, he overtook Silvertip. Silvertip looked back and saw him coming, and pulled up.

As he rode up, Jabez yelled, "Yuh gol-rammed old coot, what yuh think yore up to? Yuh can't match guns with Tait Ivor!"

"Can't I?" Silvertip growled.

"Yuh know danged well yuh wouldn't stand a chance, with that stiff arm. Get on back to the ranch, dag-nab yuh!"

"Like hogwash I will! I'll show that dirty owl-hoot who's yeller. Mebbe he'll get me, but I'll take him with me. I've crawled on my belly before that two-bit tinhorn the last time—"

SILVERTIP broke off with a startled squawk as Jabez chopped downward with the gun he'd eased from its holster. The gun-barrel caught Silvertip alongside the head—not hard but hard enough to knock him unconscious for a while. Jabez caught him as he wilted down in the saddle and eased him to the ground.

He dragged Silvertip into a shady thicket beside the trail then remounted the roan and rode at a gallop on toward Ox Bow. Now for the first time, there was no indecision in his mind.

The sun was low above the dark peaks

when he rode into Ox Bow. The street was almost deserted, but Jabez could feel the odd tension that held the town. Ox Bow, he knew, was waiting to see Silvertip Shane die before Tait Ivor's blazing guns.

He stopped at a tie-bar before a saloon a block along the street from the ornate Taos Queen. He went along the boardwalk, head high, swaggering a little, and went between the batwings of the Taos Queen. In the center of the room, he paused, eyes narrowing down on Tait Ivor at the shiny bar. The big, dark-faced rancher-gambler was flanked on either side by a cold-eyed, gun-belted hireling. Sudden silence gripped the crowded room.

"Ivor, I'm callin' yore bluff!" Jabez announced flatly. "In just ten minutes, I'll leave the Silver Dollar saloon and walk along the middle of the street. If yuh ain't the yella-bellied polecat I think yuh are, yuh'll come to meet me!"

Somebody sniggered. But Tait Ivor didn't smile. He peered warily at the oldster. "Ain't you the old mossback I kicked out of here a few days ago?" he demanded.

"That's right. But I'm back, like yuh can see. Back in place of Silvertip Shane. Silvertip's had an accident, so I'm takin' his place. Remember, tinhorn, I'll start walkin' in just ten minutes!"

He turned, stalked from the room. He went back along the walk and entered the less pretentious Silver Dollar saloon. Half a dozen men stared curiously at him as he strode to the bar and ordered a glass of beer. Back to the bar, he sipped the beer, as the seconds ticked away. His huge old watch lay on the bar. The room was very quiet.

Abruptly, then, Jabez Peters returned the old watch to his pocket, and walked slowly outside. At the same instant, glancing along the street, he saw the flashy figure of Tait Ivor leave the Taos Queen, and move slowly toward him.

Tait Ivor walked with deliberate tread, arms stiff at his side, arrogant confidence in his eyes. His yellow silk shirt gleamed in the sun's dying rays.

And Jabez Peters shuffled slowly to meet him, stiff-legged, arms at his sides, gnarled fingers brushing the black haft of the old pistol. This was a scene that sent old memories rioting through his brain. But Tait Ivor wasn't like those others he'd faced. Tait Ivor was cunning, with some treacherous scheme boiling in his brain. Now a hundred feet separated them, now fifty.

Ivor's sneering voice was barely audible. "You'll leave town, all right, you old fool—in a pine box!"

"Any time, tinhorn!" Jabez replied.

Briefly, Ivor's jet eyes flicked aside and upward, to Jabez' left. And at that instant, Jabez heard two things: a low, scraping noise, in the direction in which Ivor had glanced—and a wild clatter of hoofs behind him.

Then, with panicky haste, Ivor grabbed for his fancy gun.

Jabez' draw was smoother, more deliberate, but just as fast. A gun blasted behind him, a man screamed. There was a wild clattering, above and to his left, and Jabez was conscious that a man—one of Ivor's killers—had tumbled stiffly to the ground from the second-story window of a building.

BUT Jabez didn't move his eyes from Tait Ivor. For now Ivor's gun was roaring, blazing. But seeing his henchman shot from the window had unnerved him, and his first shot went wild.

But "Alamo" Peters' shot went right where he wanted it. He stood there, gunsmoke curling about his gnarled figure, and watched Tait Ivor wilt slowly down to the ground.

The thud of boots behind him made him turn about. Silvertip Shane, blood running over his face, smoking gun in hand, had jumped from his horse and was running toward Jabez. Jabez' glance flicked at the still figure there in the dust where it had tumbled from the store window. It was Silvertip who had arrived just in time to do that, to save his, Jabez' life!

Silvertip scooted on braking boot-heels. "Dad-gust yuh, Jabez," he snapped fiercely, "what yuh mean by bustin' me on the head like that? I ought to whip yore scaly ears off!"

"Yuh never was man enough to do that, Silvertip, as yuh dang well know," Jabez countered grinning.

Then Silvertip grinned, too. They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, no longer looking back down the distant smokey years. For here was the present to be lived, vivid, beckoning, vital with the bittersweet smell of burnt powder!

To be read before the 4TH War Loan Drive

ONE DAY SOON you will be asked to lend your Government at least an extra $100. To put at least an extra $100, *over* your regular Bond buying, into War Bonds for the 4th War Loan.

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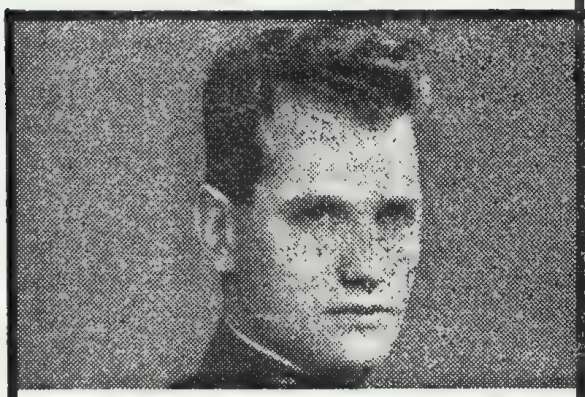
Then think how hard it would be to have to tell Americans like these that *other* Americans can't afford to lend *at least* an extra $100!

Captain Albert H. Rooks was commanding officer of U.S.S. Houston. Engaging an overwhelming Jap force, the Houston smashed into them and went down, guns blazing. Rooks went down with his ship.



Lieutenant George H. Cannon, U.S.M.C., was mortally wounded during the Jap bombardment of Midway, Dec. 7th. He refused to be taken to a hospital till all his men had been evacuated, and as a result, he died of loss of blood.

Lieutenant Alexander Nininger, fought his way into the Jap lines on Bataan. Wounded 3 times, he continued to advance until he was killed. When his body was found, a Jap officer and two Jap soldiers lay dead around him.

Keep Backing the Attack!

The Treasury Department acknowledges with appreciation the publication of this advertisement by

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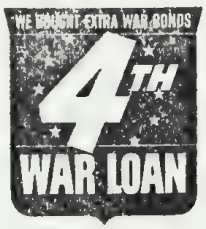

This advertisement prepared under the auspices of the War Advertising Council and the U.S. Treasury Department

DIABLO DEPUTY

By

JACKSON COLE

Tuck Bannister Redeems Himself in the Eyes of the Law when He Turns Desperado and Almost Gets Away with It!

The Diablo wolves scattered into the bush

I WAS at the corral fixin' to take the kinks out of a wild one when I saw a rider come from the cedar brakes below my cabin there on Bearcat Creek. Right off I saw that it was Sheriff Sam Norbek from Cougar Gap.

I thought quick, trying to remember what I'd done lately, which wasn't hard . . . and seeing a sheriff didn't make me feel any better. But I closed the corral gate and stood there waiting while the sheriff rode up and stopped. He was a skinny, ugly little hombre with pale walrus mustaches. He hooked a knee about the saddlehorn and started making a smoke, looking at me slantwise. "You Tuck Bannister, ain't you?" he asked.

I said I was and what about it?

The little hombre grinned. "Why, nothin'. I was in this neck of the country and thought I'd stop by and see yuh. I heard a lot about yuh."

"Such as what?"

"Why, such as yuh bein' a hard worker and an honest, law-abidin' citizen. Yuh ought to come into town oftener."

"Well, yeah, mebby I had," I said. "At first I thought yuh might be trailin' a criminal."

"Matter of fact, I am," the sheriff said, swinging to the ground. "Like, yuh know, somebody cut a fence all to pieces that Luke Rumar had throwed about Wolf Springs a few miles north of here, couple nights ago."

I said, "I heard about it. Wonder what skunk could have done a thing like that?"

"I been studyin' it. Cuttin' that fence was pretty bad, or mebby it wasn't, dependin' on how yuh look at it. Luke Rumar is a tight-fisted cuss, and crooked as a barrel o' sidewinders playin' tag in a cane field. But he claims that water belongs to him."

"HE'S a liar, and a buzzard to boot," I yelled. "Wolf Springs is on free land. Cows of half a dozen ranches, includin' mine, have always watered there. Until two months ago when it got real dry, and then Rumar claimed he had the springs leased and put up a fence, aimin' to starve everybody else out."

"He *does* have the springs leased. I looked up the records."

I looked sidewise at the sheriff. I could see there was somethin' on his mind. He

spat tobacco juice at a scurrying lizard twenty feet away, scoring a bull's-eye. Then he said:

"Younker, how would yuh like to make five hundred dollars?"

"Fine," I said. "Who you want killed?"

"Nobody, mebby. What I want yuh to do is honest and law-abidin'."

"Such as what?"

"Yuh ever heard of the Hondo Kid?"

I said I had. The Hondo Kid was a cross between a hydrophobia skunk and a sidewinder.

He was slick, too, and for a long time he'd made a monkey out of Sheriff Sam Norbek.

"What about it?" I asked.

"This Hondo Kid pulled another killin' in Cougar Gap two days ago," the sheriff said. "He got away, the same as usual. But I know where he is. And I want you to go get him."

I said, "I'm glad you dropped by—you're welcome to visit any time. But I got a lot of work to do now, so excuse me."

"There's a five hundred dollar bounty on the Kid's head," the sheriff went on. "All yuh got to do is bring him in and it's yores. I figgered I was doin' yuh a favor. Yuh want the job?"

"No, by hellity, I don't want the job!" I hollered. "I got a job, bustin' these wild broomtails."

"Bustin' broomtails is better'n bustin' big rocks into little ones."

I felt my Adam's apple hit my chin.

"Meanin' what?"

"Why, nothin' much. Only I was up at Wolf Springs yesterday. I found some clues. And I followed that fence-cutter's tracks to where they went. . . . But I ain't said anything about it, because I figger Luke Rumar is a dirty skunk and deserves anything he gets.

"But he *does* own that water, and that makes whoever cut that fence a criminal. I figger some juries would give him about ten years in the pen. That'd be pretty tough, wouldn't it?"

"F-fact," I gulped. "Yuh don't aim to mention it, huh?"

"I dunno." The runty sheriff looked pretty sad. "I didn't sleep hardly any last night. Reckon it was my conscience. One minute I say I'll keep quiet, the next I say I won't. You in a big hurry to bust them broomtails, kid?"

I felt kind of pale. I said, "Reckon they can wait. This Hondo Kid—why don't yuh catch him yoreself?"

"Because he knows me. I know where the Kid's holed up, all right; but if I, or one of my deputies, started after him, somebody would tip him off and we wouldn't have a chance. I figger our only chance is to send somebody don't him nor any of his friends know. Like you, say." . . "And where is the Hondo Kid holed up?"

"Down river, at Diablo."

"Diablo!" I yelled. "If I wanted to commit suicide I could think of lots better ways to do it!"

The sheriff jumped up, holdin' his stomach and makin' faces like he hurt.

"It's my conscience ag'in," he moaned. "Don't reckon I'll be able to stand it much longer."

I quieted. He certainly had me cold turkey.

"Yuh mean," I asked, "if I don't take this job yuh figger to jail that fence-cutter?"

"Reckon I'd have to."

I didn't want to be the cause of an innocent fence-cutter going to jail. So I said,

"I'll do it. I'll go after the Hondo Kid. Yuh got any ideas?"

THE sheriff grinned. "I figgered I could count on yuh to uphold the glory of the law, Bannister," he said. "Anybody in Diablo know yuh?"

I said no, they didn't, and if it was left to me they never would.

Diablo was a shack town fifteen miles down the river from Cougar Gap. It was an outlaw hideout. Off in the brakes as it was, lawmen seldom went there so long as the riff-raff fought and killed each other and let honest folks alone. Diablo might bed down a rattlesnake, but not a lawman. There were plenty of wanted men there, but no lawman had ever gone in and got one.

"I figger it this way," said the skinny sheriff. "If me or one of my deputies went in, alone, we mebby wouldn't get out. If I took in a posse, everybody'd scatter into the bottomlands.

"But you, not bein' known, can go in. Yuh can spread the word that yuh're a reg'lar ring-tailed bearcat, a *malo hombre* wanted for half a dozen killin's. That way, yuh can get next to the Hondo

(Continued on page 87)

Wanted: Investors

A War Bond Message

By

IRVIN S. COBB

Famous writer, lecturer and humorist —author of "Exit Laughing."

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Should you fail to take full opportunity, according to your means, of this chance—you may lose, you very possibly will lose, not only your cash, wherever stored, and all your earned or inherited assets and estates of whatsoever character, but you stand to lose things infinitely more precious than these material belongings—your liberty, your free privileges, your earthly rights, and your hope of helping to save self-government and self-respect for all the decently civilized peoples of all the world.

Should that come to pass what then would physical possessions be worth to you, you who are citizens of a land pledging the blood of its manhood, the hereafter of its children to the preservation of the only way of life worth living?

BUY WAR STAMPS! BUY WAR BONDS!

DIABLO DEPUTY

(Continued from page 85)

Kid and bring him out. How does it sound?"

"S-same as messin' with a bunch of sidewinders and wildcats that're fightin' each other."

"Well, that's settled then." The sheriff took a deputy's badge from his pocket. "I'll deputize yuh, but yuh better keep this badge where it won't show. Come by my office in Cougar Gap before yuh go and I'll loan yuh a hoss that'll outrun anything in the country."

"What if I can't find this Hondo Kid?"

"Then yuh better keep lookin' till yuh do find him. Ain't no predictin' what a man's conscience'll do!"

And the sheriff got back on his bronc and rode away.

About noon two days later I rode up out of the bottoms and into Diablo. The ugly shacks of the hideout huddled in a clearing on one bank of the river. Once, years ago, it had been a gold camp. The gold had petered out, but the scum it had drawn remained. Diablo looked bad, smelled bad, was bad.

I didn't see many people as I rode along the rutted, weed-grown street. But I could feel eyes boring at me from windows, and I wished I was some other place. A couple of dirty, gun-belted hombres sprawled in the shade and watched me as I rode up to the saloon.

The big, long-legged black gelding the sheriff had loaned me didn't like the smell of the place, but I got off and left him at a tie-bar. Inside the saloon a half a dozen men were doing nothing in particular. They certainly looked tough. They didn't pay much attention to me, but I could see they were giving me the once-over.

"Likker, the meanest yuh got," I told the one-eyed barkeep.

He didn't move, just sat and looked at me with his one good eye. I slammed my fist against the rotting bar.

"Spike that likker with a little rattler pizen," I yelled. "Me, I'm Bearcat Bannister. I eat my sidewinder steaks raw, seasoned with gunpowder and arsenic, and I take my mornin' exercises by battlin' with a couple full-growed grizzlies. Now trot out that panther juice!"

The barkeep didn't look scared, but he got up and shoved out a bottle and dirty glass. The other hard-cases grinned. I downed a man-sized drink, and what felt

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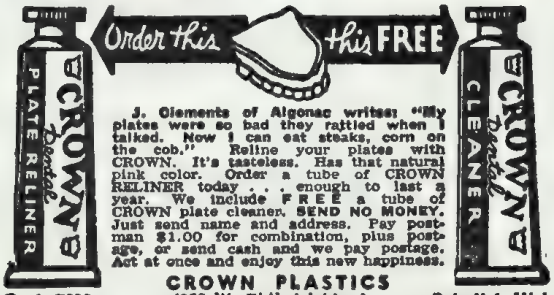

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like a streak of fire went all the way down to my toes.

"Lookin' for a place to bed down for a few days," I said, "and I heard this was a pretty good place."

"Depends," grunted One-eye. "A lot of hombres have bedded down here—permanent."

The others seemed to think that was a pretty good joke.

"Lawmen bedded down free," one sniggered. "Deep down!"

That deputy's badge in my shirt pocket felt big as a skinned mule. But I said,

"Any you gents insinuatin' I'm a lawman?"

They said no, they wasn't.

"Any gent as dumb and ugly as you couldn't be a lawman," the first hombre said. "Ain't only dudes lawmen. Bearcat, we aim to let yuh buy us a drink."

WHICH I did, and after that everything went off pretty smooth. I could see I'd made a hit. After a couple more drinks of that bottled dynamite I started in to feel sorry for the Hondo Kid because he was about to be jailed and mebby hanged.

More tough ones came in, and we had a pretty high time.

"Bearcat Bannister," I said. "When I was foaled I had five rattles and a button. When I was only four I eared down a tornado that come hellin' up outa Sonora, climbed aboard and spurred 'er all over three states, quirtin' 'er with live rattlesnakes in each hand every jump she made!"

"He done it, too," somebody said. "'Cause I was there and saw it!"

I turned, and there stood the Hondo Kid. I'd have known him anywhere, because his picture was on some reward posters the sheriff showed me. He was a slender, dark, mean-eyed little hombre. He wore a cream Stetson, shiny boots, and a yellow silk shirt that nearly put my eyes out.

"I'm buyin' you a drink, Kid," I said.

The Hondo Kid's eyes got snaky.

"How'd yuh know I was the Hondo Kid?"

"Saw yore picture tacked to a tree not ten hours ago," I said. "It was right next to mine."

That went over pretty good. The Kid slapped me on the shoulder, and we had a drink. A couple of hours passed. I'd found the Hondo Kid, all right, but it

wasn't doing me any good. I didn't see any chance of getting him out to Cougar Gap. Each gent that came into the saloon looked a little tougher than the last. I knew I wouldn't have a chance if they savvied about that special deputy's badge in my shirt pocket.

But I got along fine with the Hondo Kid. He told me about that latest killin' of his up at Cougar Gap, and we had a good laugh. Then we got into a stud game, along with a fat gent and a swarthy 'breed.

Everything went pretty smooth, till the Kid accused the 'breed of pullin' an ace from his boot-top. The 'breed didn't say anything—just grabbed a big skinnin' knife and lunged at the Kid.

Now, for my own good, I didn't aim to see the Hondo Kid put away. So I slammed my boot heel under the 'breed's chin, lifting him clear off the floor and half across the room, and before he could get his eyes uncrossed I had his knife and gun. The Kid cussed a while, and then he said: "Thanks, Bearcat—yuh're a real hombre. Me and you could go places."

The only place I wanted to go was away from there. But I couldn't go without the Hondo Kid. It was gettin' on towards sundown. And I kept thinkin' about what that hombre said about beddin' lawmen down here—deep down.

[*Turn page*]

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"We stayed here long enough, Bearcat," the Hondo Kid said, slappin' me on the shoulder. "Let's amble over to another place I know about."

That suited me, so we went out. Mebby it was the stuff I'd drunk, or mebby it was the sun in my eyes, but as I went out I stumbled over a loose board and sprawled on my face. When I got up, I saw that the Hondo Kid had stopped and was starin' at something on the board walk where I'd fallen.

I looked, and felt like a mule had kicked me in the stomach. There on the walk, where it had fallen from my shirt pocket, was the deputy sheriff's badge! It looked big as a barrel.

I knew what I had to do, and I done it. I grabbed my gun, jumped in close, hit the Kid over the head with the gun-barrel. He yelled, tried to get away, and I hit him again. That done it, and he'd have wilted down to the ground if I hadn't caught him.

THE sheriff's big black stood not twenty feet away. I lifted the Hondo Kid and tossed him face-down across the saddle. Then I jumped up behind, dug in the steel, and the black started hell-bent for the tall timber.

A hook-nosed hombre, comin' along the board walk, had seen what happened, and now he started yelling.

"That skunk was a dirty lawman, and he's got the Kid! Come a-smokin', you Diablo wolves!"

And they come, boilin' like rats from the shacks. Guns opened up and bullets started snarlin' past my head, and thinkin' about my sinful past made me feel pretty bad. But I was beyond gun range pretty quick. As I rounded a bend I looked back and saw half a dozen men hit leather and start foggin' along the street after me and the Hondo Kid.

That fifteen miles stretchin' ahead to Cougar Gap seemed like a thousand. I didn't have a chance to take to the brush and get away, for them Diablo gun-wolves was pressin' me too close. On straight stretches of the trail I could see them, mebby a quarter-mile behind. They had pretty good horses, too.

On a fair run, the black would have pulled away. But, carryin' double, he couldn't do it. After four or five miles he slowed, and the Diablo hombres began to pull up. The Hondo Kid was still unconscious. I knew I could dump him, and

mebby save my hide, but I wouldn't do it. A sheriff's conscience is somethin' yuh can't mess with.

About halfway to Cougar Gap there was an old, deserted shack, that I'd seen comin' in. I figgered my best chance was to hole up there and make a fight of it. So I done it. I sent the black gallopin' on down the trail, and got into the shack just as the blood-thirsty Diablo-ers came into sight. They saw me as I went in, and they opened up again.

I dodged across to a window, stuck my six-shooter through and smoked away. One of them yelled, grabbed at his thigh. That stopped 'em, and they scattered into the thickets and brush that hemmed the old cabin. The sun was down now and shadows were sneakin' through the bottomlands.

I looked about the shack. It was empty except for rubbish that littered the floor. Big holes had rotted in the roof, and there were big cracks between the wall logs. I could see I was in a pretty bad spot.

After a while the outlaws opened up again outside. I couldn't see anybody to shoot at, but I blazed away to show 'em I wasn't asleep. Then the shootin' died down again, and somebody yelled:

[*Turn page*]

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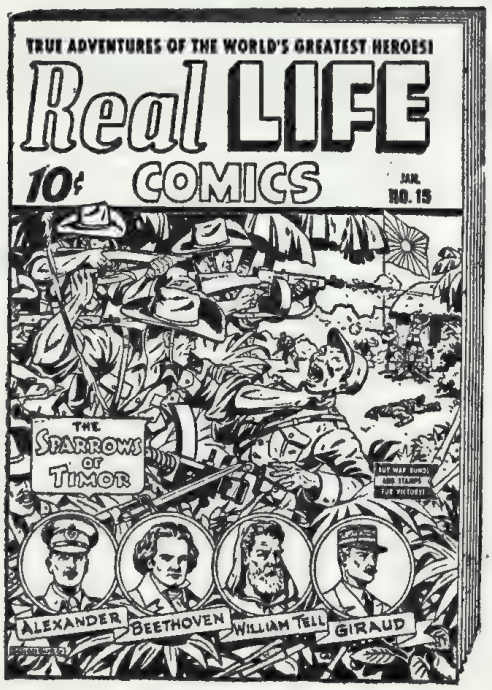

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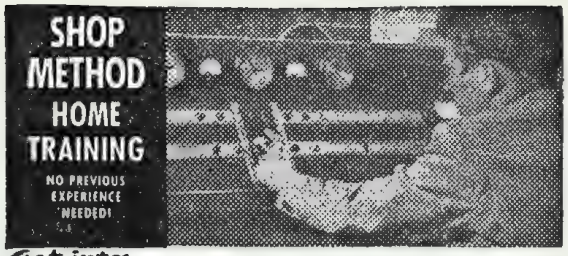

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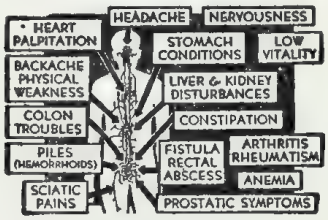

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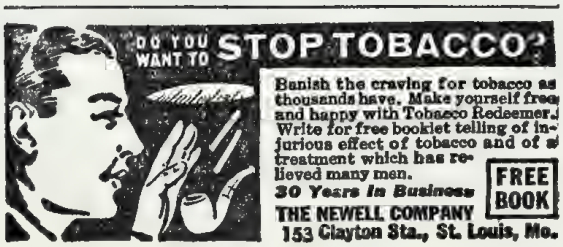
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"Yuh might as well give up, lawman—we got yuh in a hole with both ends stopped up!"

I said, "If I can't get out, you can't get in!"

"We'll see about that . . . But we'll make yuh a swap. The Hondo Kid's all we want. Just send him out, and yuh can ride away. How about it?"

"I won't do it," I said. "And I'll salt the first skunk that tries to take him!"

That started it again. It was pretty bad for a while. I hugged the floor, feelin' an occasional bullet cut the air inches above. Then the firin' died again, and I cut loose with a couple just to show 'em I was on the job. That went on for what seemed like hours.

I couldn't get away, and the Diablo gunmen wouldn't get too close, for a moon made it almost light as day outside.

Finally, one of them yelled,

"Look, lawman—this is yore last chance. Mebby yuh'll get some of us, but we'll sure get you. Send the Hondo Kid out, or we'll come in and get him!"

So I said, "Come ahead, if yuh just got to do it!"

And they started comin'. What had happened before seemed pretty tame. They'd have got me, too, if it hadn't been for about a dozen riders that come shootin' and yellin' along the trail from Cougar Gap just about then.

That finished it. The Diablo wolves—all except a couple that wouldn't ever go anywhere again—scattered into the brush. I came out of the shack and Sheriff Sam Norbek saw me.

"Yuh all right, Bannister?" he hollered.

"That depends," I said. "Yuh had any trouble with yore conscience lately, sheriff?"

The sheriff grinned.

"I slept good last night," he said, "so I don't reckon my conscience'll bother me any more."

"Yuh seen anythin' of the Hondo Kid?"

"If I hadn't I wouldn't be here. I told yuh that black'd come home if yuh turned him loose, didn't I? It was pretty slick, tyin' the Hondo Kid to the saddle and sendin' him on to Cougar Gap, while you stopped and held them Diablo skunks up."

"That wasn't much," I said. "The hard part was writin' that note, tellin' yuh where I was, and pinnin' it to the seat of the Hondo Kid's pants, with the black runnin' like it was!"

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 9)

Miguel dates from the founding of the Spanish town destroyed in part by Indians.

It was restored in 1710. It is the oldest church in use in New Mexico and of course the oldest in the United States. It has been the center for everything of historic and churchly interest in that ancient Spanish town for nearly three hundred years. It has looked down upon the rule of Spaniards, Indians, Mexicans and Americans. Yet it has sheltered all within its sacred walls, called all of them to prayer, and heard for more than two centuries their confessions and their litanies. Under its shadow, General Lew Wallace wrote his famous novel "Ben Hur" while governor of New Mexico in 1879-80.

Monuments to the Pioneers

Missions and churches are not the only things that stand as monuments to the lives of early pioneers of the West. In Arizona there is the town of Williams, and Bill Williams Mountain, named after and in memory of one of the quaintest as well as one of the most mysterious characters that the early West ever knew, Old Bill Williams, hunter and trapper who came from no one knows where.

There seems to be no record of when he departed this life, but for more than a hundred years tales of this quaint character have been told in Arizona while many of the citizens of the town who are where they can gaze upon the mountain anytime, forget, or do not seem to know why these places were so named.

If you ask the question of a citizen of the town, "Who was this Bill Williams?" the answer is likely to be, "That's something no one around here seems to know. He was a hunter and trapper who roamed all over the Rocky Mountains a hundred years or more ago. Most everyone's heard about him, but there is not much definite known about him."

The Lone Elk

Bill Williams remains a being half myth, half mystery. Securely as his name is rooted in Arizona, it seems impossible to get accurate data about many things that transpired during his life. It is known that he was very eccentric. The Indians of the far Northwest called him "The Lone Elk." Other trappers would meet him everywhere from British Columbia to the Mexican border, but none really knew him intimately.

The best description of Old Bill Williams available is that he was lean, awkward, and ludicrous on horseback. He rode with his stirrups so short that his knees hobnobbed with the pommel of his saddle, yet he was a good rider, neither horse nor mule could unseat him.

He was far from elegant in his tight-fitting buckskin trousers which were as a rule so short that they exposed part of his legs. His buckskin hunting shirt was also tight, smooth and stiff with grease, with most of the ornamental fringe torn away to serve as thongs for his moccasins or his pack saddle, but he

[*Turn page*]

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was a fighter and a man always on the alert. Other trappers felt safe when he led the party, which was not often, as he seemed to prefer to be alone.

When fighting Indians in the company of others, he was always cool, and brave, but he fought "on his own hook" and decided for himself when he would fight and when he would retire.

One definite record of Bill Williams and a record that places him on a par with the bravest of brave pioneers is the record of his service as guide for John C. Fremont's Fourth Expedition over the highest and wildest ranges of the Rocky Mountains in the late autumn of 1848, and although he had advised against the route selected by Fremont, and wanted to take a more southern route along the Colorado and New Mexico border, after accepting the position as guide he risked his life to try and see it through.

After the expedition had been caught in the deep snow of the mountain passes and had all but starved, he volunteered and did make the trip on foot to Taos, New Mexico, the nearest settlement, one hundred and eighty miles to the south, to secure relief. Only three of the expedition besides Williams survived. They were Fremont, Thomas E. Breckenridge and Micajah McGehee.

Surely no pioneer ever displayed more fortitude, more courage, or endured more privation than he did on this occasion and that is why there is a Bill Williams Mountain and a town in the now prosperous state of Arizona named for him.

The Town of Tombstone

There is another monument erected to the memory of a pioneer in Arizona. It is just off the Bankhead Highway a few miles from Tombstone. It's a rough shaftlike monument of rocks and was erected to the memory and over the grave of Ed Schiefflen, who discovered ore in that section of the country, ore that resulted in the building of "Tombstone," one of the wildest mining towns the West has ever known.

"Tombstone" was given that name because while prospecting for ore in the lonely fastnesses of that mountainous country, Schiefflen was asked what he was looking for, and when he replied that he was looking for certain kinds of rock, the inquisitor, having in mind the ever present menace of Indians, replied: "About the only kind of rock you will find around here will be your tombstone!"

Although his discovery of ore caused the building of a town that was known as the gunman's paradise and for a few years was the mecca of gunmen, gamblers and outlaws, law and order finally triumphed. The gunmen and outlaws were run out or killed off while prosperity remained and the enterprise of the law-abiding citizens carried that section on to take its place as a real part of the great and modern West, which after winning its freedom from the menace of hostile Indians and outlaws is now doing its part in many ways in that great fight raging all over the world.

It is needless to say that the West will not be found wanting in this conflict, and will work and fight with the nation and our allies

to a victorious ending of this our battle against the war-breeding dictators.

Thousands of sons of the West are inspired by their forebears, the brave pioneers of the West, who never stopped to count the odds in battle, while they wage a relentless and victorious war against the enemies of world freedom and happiness.

Adios.

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FREEDOM! It is for this that men fight and die, and it was what Bill Maitland found again after ten long, dreary years in a Mexican prison. Once again he was with his wife and young ten-year-old son, heading back to Texas.

Maitland planned to start life all over again with those who were nearest and dearest to him. He was positive that his own brother had framed him so that John Maitland might have Bill's ranch and gold—but he was going back.

The sinister forces of evil have many minions to do their ruthless deeds—and Joe Gill, the ferryman on the Rio Grande, was one of these. It was to Gill that Bill Maitland came on that grim, storm-tossed night. There was no other place where the river could be crossed for miles in either direction—the ferry that Joe Gill owned was the only way.

Let author Larry Harris tell you what happened then—in this striking excerpt from DEAD MAN'S RANCH, his dramatic and thrill-packed complete book-length novel coming next issue:

From beneath the brim of his hat, Joe Gill stared at Bill Maitland, who was still wearing his Mexican sombrero and sandals. An old slicker covered his clothes. The ferryman's bloodshot eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Say, feller, seems to me like I oughta know yuh," he said.

Maitland didn't see the warning look that his wife gave him from the seat of the surrey.

"Maybe yuh do. I know yuh. Yuh're Joe Gill, ain't yuh?"

'And what did yuh say yore name was?"

"Bill Maitland."

Joe Gill nodded and looked away to hide the gleam in his shifty eyes. "That's it. Thought I recognized yuh. Been a long time since yuh was down this way, ain't it? changed a good deal, too—"

In the rig seat with his mother ten-year-old Bret didn't hear what else the two men said. He kept staring at the broad, swiftly flowing river, his panic returning. The two horses were trembling. Bill Maitland held them when Joe Gill got the scow back in motion. Slowly the heavily loaded craft crept out into midstream.

Bret held his breath, terrified. Each second he expected the cable to break. The tree-lined Texas bank came nearer. Maitland, holding the team, didn't see Joe Gill behind the rig, crouched near the stanchion. Nor did he see the wild gleam in the ferryman's eyes.

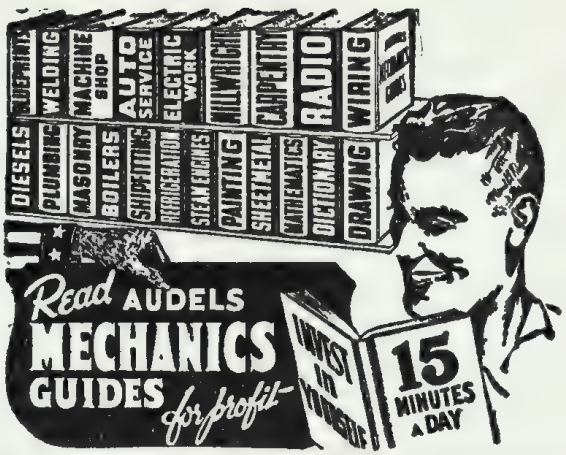
Fifty feet from the Texas bank it happened. The ferry's stern suddenly whirled away with the current. The team reared and Bill Maitland clutched at them, cursing. The engine raced as the hawser snapped. Joe Gill's voice rose to a high wail.

"The line broke!" he shrieked. "We're done fer!"

Cold horror convulsed in Bret. All his life he'd remember his mother's fear-filled scream as the rig capsized. Water washed over the whirling, flood-tossed scow. Above the hiss of escaping steam, the roar of the churning waters and the shrill neigh of the horses, Bret heard his father's frantic yell. And even as he was falling, he caught a glimpse of Joe Gill already in the river, swimming frantically toward the bank.

They were two hundred yards below the landing, shooting into the narrows when the ferry struck a snag. Timber crashed and logs flew into

[*Turn page*]



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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Masked Rider Western, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1, 1943. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Masked Rider Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1943. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30th, 1945.

the air. Sobbing, screaming, Bret struck the water before Bill Maitland could reach him. He sank, the undertow turning him end over end. Broken bits of wreckage battered him.

Then he was abreast of the flood, struggling and kicking. Nowhere were his mother and father in sight. Only logs and debris—muddy waves. A mighty roar filled his ears. Strangling, choking, he clawed at a log, clung to it, his pitiful cries growing weaker. As if in a ghastly nightmare he caught a glimpse of the high mud bank on the Texas side.

He didn't see the black-clad rider bolting hell-for-leather along the river bank farther downstream. The rider was wearing a flowing black cape, fluttering back in the wind. A black mask covered the upper part of his lean-jawed face. As if by magic he had appeared. His powerful black stallion fairly flew over the ground at the water's edge.

Then the masked man was off his horse. He had one end of a lariat tied to the kak horn, the other end fastened securely about his waist. Tossing his sombrero and gun-belts to the ground, he plunged headlong into the raging current. Only a man of reckless daring would have done such a thing, but it wasn't the first time the masked man had defied death.

Seconds ago he had reached the river bank just in time to see the ferry capsize, to hear the woman's terror-filled scream. Nowhere now in the current swept wreckage did he see man or woman, but the boy was clinging to a log, coming downstream toward him.

"Hang on, boy!" the masked man yelled.

He was several yards out from the bank, fighting the swift flow to hold his own. Swimming with all his might, he saw the boy's terror-stricken eyes upon him. Bret, white-faced and all but unconscious, made one last feeble cry.

"Help! Help!"

The masked man dived as the log came straight toward him. Praying that his luck would hold, he came to the surface to find the boy in his arms. His lungs felt as if they were afire. The current spun them. The masked man clung to his limp burden. At the top of his lungs he yelled:

"Back, Midnight! Fetch us in, boy! Pull!"

The trembling, snorting horse began backing, backing. At the other end of the taut rope the masked man held tight to the boy. Utterly exhausted, he found footing, staggered up the muddy bank to safety. Dripping with mud and water, he carried the unconscious boy to the high ground, laid him down and began working on him.

It was several minutes before Bret's eyes opened. For the moment his horror was gone. Dazedly he stared up into the blue eyes of the man who had saved his life. There was no fear in the boy's face, only awe and wonder.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped. "And what—what happened?"

The masked man smiled grimly. "I'm the Masked Rider, sonny," he said, his voice deep and kind. "And I'll tell yuh what happened when yuh feel stronger."

And that is only a sample of the action that fills every page of DEAD MAN'S RANCH, the exciting novel in the next issue! Once again the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, his Yaqui Indian companion, find themselves battling great odds when they try to bring peace to nesters and cattlemen whose hearts are seething with hate. It is a grand yarn from start to finish.

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Your letters help us improve the magazine! Comments, criticisms and suggestions are always welcome—so write and tell us what stories you like best and about those you don't like as well. We'll be delighted to hear from all of you.

Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Here is a letter from a reader who sure knows just what he likes:

I've been a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN for some years and I think the magazine is swell. I've ridden with Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk all over the West, in summer, winter, spring and fall. Sometimes I think the featured novels are swell, and at other times just fair—but all the same I never fail to read the latest issue. Whoopee for the Masked Rider!—*Bob Martin, Denver, Colorado.*

Thanks for those kind words, Bob. Here is a reader who isn't cheering so loudly:

After reading lots of Western stories including the Masked Rider novels, I have about decided that the fellow who really got rich in those Western towns must have been the undertaker. So I'm a grouch—but I must admit that I like the Masked Rider fairly well.—*Fredrick Nash, Boston, Mass.*

Thanks for your letter, Fred. And don't think you're a grouch at all. Write us again. Well, folks, I'll be seeing all of you next time—so long for now—THE EDITOR.

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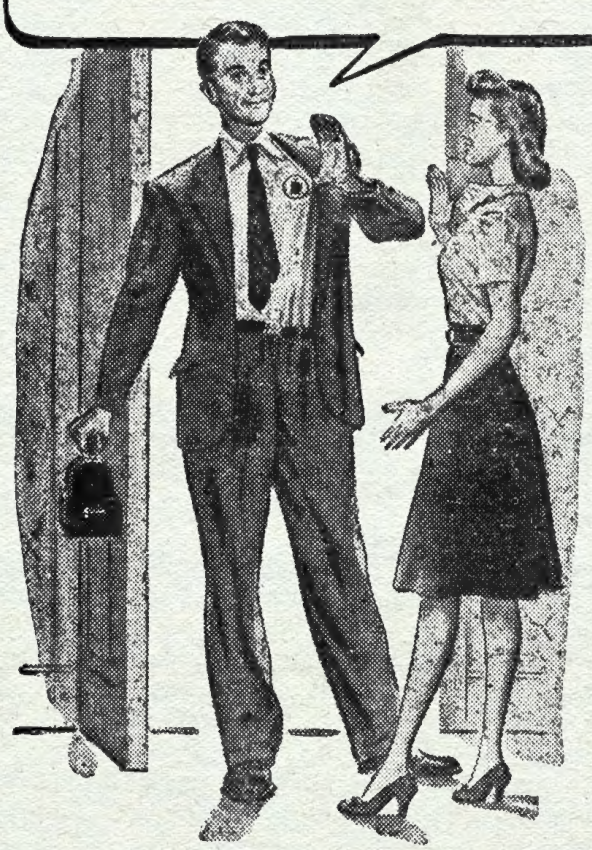

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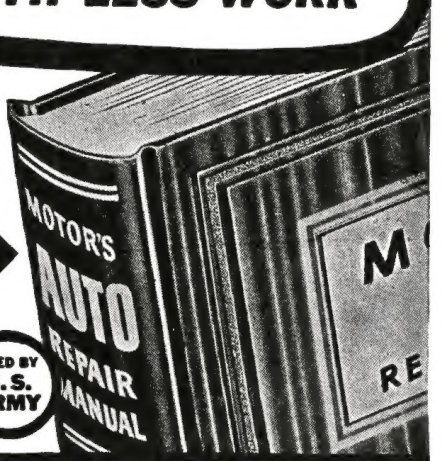

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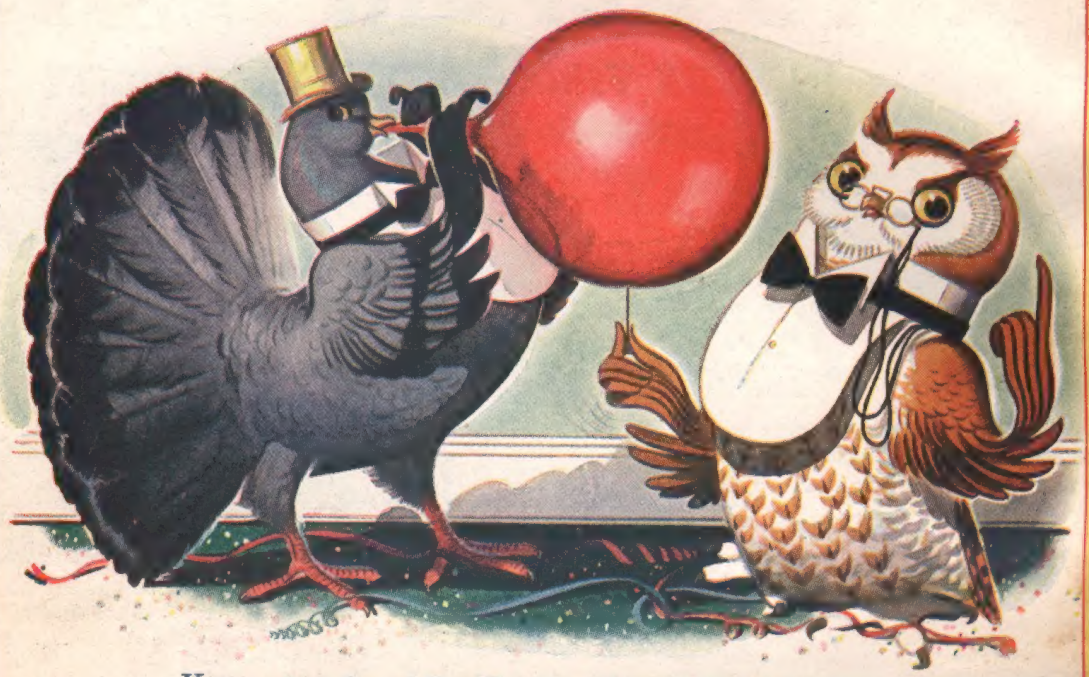

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